

# A POET'S BIBLE

DAVID ROSENBERG

*Interpreted from the Original Hebrew*

*Includes:*

Blues of the Sky  
*The Book of Psalms*

Job Speaks  
*The Book of Job*

Lightworks  
*The Prophet Isaiah*

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*Interpreted from  
the original Hebrew  
Book of Psalms*

*The Lord is my shepherd  
and keeps me from wanting  
what I can't have  
  
lush green grass is set  
around me and crystal water  
to graze by  
  
there I revive with my soul  
find the way that love makes  
for his name*

With these new, yet somehow familiar, words begins Psalm 23, one of the twenty psalms rediscovered for today by poet David Rosenberg.

**Blues of the Sky** marks the first translation from the original tongue by a contemporary American poet. Rosenberg locates the psalms as *poetry*—to be read, sung, chanted, spoken aloud in this day as they were in King David's.

In fresh, interpretive language, **Blues of the Sky** reestablishes the rhythms and imagery so vivid in Hebrew yet sadly diluted in modern Bible translations. More than this, Rosenberg uses the flexibility of contemporary language to imbue the psalms with a distinctly American cast. Today's reader encounters as for the first time the bright mornings of radiant joy and the midnights of despair that brought these song-poems into being.

Liberated from the equally restrictive limitations of Elizabethan English or "idiomatic" paraphrase, the reader sees with the psalmist

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*(continued from front flap)*

"his song's urge toward lightness, paralleling the strength of his faith in a higher being, a being whose ear he approaches as he listens to himself."

Above all, **Blues of the Sky** is a series of convergences: today's English with ancient Hebrew, the contemporary search within with the age-old search for God, poetry with prayer. These translations are new, unexpected, often startling. But, as the psalmist notes to God in Psalm 12 of **Blues of the Sky**, "these words were always yours."



*Michael McKenzie*

Born in Detroit in 1943, **David Rosenberg** received his BA from the University of Michigan (where a collection of his poems won the Hopwood Award) and his MA from Syracuse University. He has published ten books and gives many readings of his poetry. Mr. Rosenberg recently completed a poetry translation of the Book of Job and is now at work on translations from the Prophets as part of *A Poet's Bible* series.

*Jacket design by Luba Litwak*

## **In praise of Blues of the Sky...**

**"Moving and full of skill. David Rosenberg has chosen a simple diction that favors colloquial American speech. His insistence on 'making it new,' as Ezra Pound dictated that translation must, is both a poet's job and an act of devotion. Unlike most non-poets drawn to poetic texts, Rosenberg has taken his own practice into his translation to make it sing."**

**Bill Zavatsky**

***The New York Times Book Review***

**Advance comments in the literary world came from Yehuda Amichani, Israel's widely translated poet, who writes: "A beautiful re-speaking of the psalms" to John Ashbery, recipient of the 1976 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award for Poetry: "I liked them very much and am anxious to see more."**

# BLUES OF THE SKY





# BLUES OF THE SKY

*Interpreted from the  
Original Hebrew Book of Psalms*

DAVID ROSENBERG

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A POET'S BIBLE

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These psalms first appeared, some in different form, in two limited editions from Angel Hair Books: *Some Psalms* (1973) and *Blues of The Sky* (1974). A few appeared in *Exile* and *The Coldspring Journal*. "Psalm 90" was printed *hors commerce* as a broadside.

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# BLUES OF THE SKY



## Psalm 1

Happy the one  
stepping lightly over  
paper hearts of men

and out of the way  
of mind-locked reality  
the masks of sincerity

he steps from his place at the glib café  
to find himself in the word  
of the infinite

embracing it  
in his mind  
with his heart

parting his lips for it  
lightly  
day into night

transported like a tree  
to a riverbank  
sweet with fruit in time

his heart unselfish  
whatever he does  
ripens

while bitter men turn dry  
blowing in the wind  
like yesterday's paper

unable to stand  
in the gathering  
light

they fall  
faded masks  
in love's spotlight

burning hearts of paper  
unhappily  
locked in their own glare

but My Lord opens  
his loving one  
to breathe embracing air.

## Psalm 6

Lord, I'm just a worm  
don't point to me  
in frozen anger

don't let me feel  
I more than deserve  
all your rage

but mercy, Lord, let me feel mercy  
I'm weak, my spirit so dark  
even my bones shiver

my shadow surrounds me—I'm shocked  
how long, Lord, how long  
till you return to shine your light



return to me dear Lord  
bring back the light  
that I can know you by

because those that are dead  
have no thought of you  
to make a song by

I'm tired of my groaning  
my bed is flowing away  
in the nights of tears

depression like a moth  
eats from behind my face,  
tiny motors of pain push me

get out of here all you  
glad to see me so down  
your every breath so greased with vanity

My Lord is listening so high  
my heavy burden of life floats up  
as a song to him

let all my enemies shiver  
on the stage of their total self-consciousness  
and all their careers ruined in one night.

## Psalm 8

My Lord Most High  
your name shines  
on the page of the world

from behind the lights  
covering the heavens—  
my lips like infants

held to the breast  
grow  
to stun the darkest thoughts

when I look up  
from the work of my fingers  
I see the moon and stars

your hand set there  
and I can barely think  
what is a man

how did you spare a thought for him  
care to remember  
his line

descending through death  
yet you let him rise  
above himself, toward you

held by music of words . . .  
you set his mind in power  
to follow the work of your hand

laying the world at his feet  
all that is nameable  
all that changes through time

from canyons to the stars  
to starfish  
at bottom of the sea

all that moves blazing a path  
in air or water  
or deep space of imagination on paper

My Lord Most High  
your name shines  
on the page of the world.

## Psalm 12

Help, My Lord  
where's the man  
who loves you

where's the child  
with human truth  
behind him

helping him walk—  
he grows into a lie  
with his neighbors around him

speaking from made-up hearts  
he becomes an empty letter  
his lips sealed

tongue dried up  
in its coat of vanity  
its web of pride

“our lips belong to us  
do what we want  
to rise in the world

we don't want to hear  
anything higher”  
“I'm called I appear

by the human voice  
the conscious victim  
I send words to lift

whoever's waiting  
I release him from lips  
swollen in authority”

these words are free  
like released energy  
without violence

finite matter  
broken open  
with the tenderness of dawn

these words were always yours  
My Lord, you sent into the present  
lifting us from the inhuman

you are behind us  
with every step in the infinite  
through the swollen crowd around us

living lies  
in a chain of lips  
holding their children.

## Psalm 19

The universe unfolds  
the vision within:  
creation

stars and galaxies  
the words and lines  
inspired with a hand

day comes to us  
with color and shape  
and night listens

and what is heard  
breaks through deep silence  
of infinite space

the rays come to us  
like words  
come to everyone

human on earth  
we are the subjects  
of light

a community  
as it hears  
the right words

creating time  
the space of the sky  
the face of the nearest star

that beats like a heart  
in the tent where it sleeps  
near the earth every night

then rises above the horizon  
growing in our awareness  
of the embrace

of inspiration  
we feel as we turn  
toward the warmth

starting at the edge of the sky  
to come over us  
like a secret love we wait for

love we can't hide  
our deepest self-image  
from

nobody holds back that fire  
or closes the door  
of time

words My Lord writes shine  
opening me  
to witness myself

conscious and unconscious  
complex mind  
warmed in an inner lightness

that moves me  
to the simple beat  
of time

testimony  
of one author  
speaking through history's pages

commanding my attention  
bathed in light  
around me

clean perfect notes  
hearts play  
make us conscious

we become the audience  
amazed we can feel  
justice come over us

our minds become real  
unfold  
the universe within

silence becomes real  
we hear  
clear words

become the phrasing of senses  
lines of thought  
stanzas of feeling

more lovely than gold  
all the gold in the world  
melting to nothing in light

sweet flowing honey  
the right words  
in my mouth

warming your subject  
as he listens  
breaking through his reflection

his image in the mirror  
what mind can understand the failure  
waiting in itself

silent self-image  
created in the dark alone  
to hold

power over others!  
but justice comes over us  
like a feeling for words that are right

absolutely  
a mirror is pushed away  
like a necessary door

we're free to look at everything  
every shape and color  
light as words

opening the mind  
from nightmares of social failure  
desperate routines

we're inspired above  
the surface parade  
of men dressed up in power



we see the clear possibility  
of life growing  
to witness itself

let these words  
of my mouth  
be sound

the creations  
of my heart  
be light

so I can see myself  
free of desperate symbols  
mind-woven coverings

speechless fears  
images hidden within  
we are the subjects of light

opening to join you  
vision itself  
my constant creator.

## Psalm 22

Lord. My Lord, you disappear  
so far away  
unpierced by my cry

my sigh of words  
all day My Lord  
unheard

murmur of groans at night  
then silence  
no response

while you rest  
content  
in the songs of Israel

in the trust of fathers  
you delivered  
who cried to you

they were brought home  
warm and alive  
and inspired

but I am a worm  
sub-human  
what men come to

with a hate of their own futures  
despised  
and cheered like a drunk

staggering across the street  
they howl after him  
like sick dogs

"Let the Lord he cried to  
save him  
since they were so in love"

you brought me through the womb  
to the sweetness  
at my mother's breasts

no sooner my child eyes  
looked around  
I was in your lap

you are My Lord  
from the time my mother found  
me inside

make yourself appear  
I am surrounded  
and no one near

a mad crowd  
tightens a noose around me  
the ring of warheads

pressing ravenous noses  
the mad whispering of  
gray technicians

the water of my life evaporates  
my bones stick through the surface  
my heart burns down like wax

melting into my stomach  
my mouth dry as a clay cup  
dug up in the yard

I've fallen into the mud  
foaming dogs surround me  
ghost men

pierce my hands and feet  
my bones stare at me  
in disbelief

men take my clothes  
like judges  
in selfish dreams

make yourself appear  
My Lord show me  
the power

to free my life from chains  
of bitter command  
from the mouths of ghost men

trained on my heart  
like a city  
save me from mindless

megaphones of hate  
you've always heard me  
from my human heart

allowed me to speak  
in the air of your name  
to men and women

all who know fear  
of losing yourselves  
in vacant cities

speak to him  
Israel's children  
sing with him

all seed of men  
show your faces  
amazed in love

he does not despise them  
he has not disappeared  
from the faces of earth

from the ground of the worm  
or the ear of the victim  
I will always repeat

this song of life  
with my hand that is free  
from men who need victims

may our hearts live forever!  
and the furthest reaches of space  
remember our conscious moment

inspiring light  
like those disappeared from memory  
returned to the planet's earth

everyone has to appear  
at death's door  
everyone falls to the ground

while his seed carries on  
writing and speaking  
to people still to come

who remember to sing  
how generous My Lord appears  
to those hearing.

## Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd  
and keeps me from wanting  
what I can't have

lush green grass is set  
around me and crystal water  
to graze by

there I revive with my soul  
find the way that love makes  
for his name

and though I pass through cities of pain, through death's  
living shadow  
I'm not afraid to touch  
to know what I am

your shepherd's staff is always there  
to keep me calm  
in my body

you set a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies  
you give me grace to speak

to quiet them  
to be full with humanness  
to be warm in my soul's lightness

to feel contact every day  
in my hand and in my belly  
love coming down to me

in the air of your name, Lord  
in your house  
in my life.

## Psalm 30

High praises  
to you who raised me  
up

so my critics fall silent  
from their death wishes  
over me

Lord Most High  
I called you  
and I was made new

you pulled me back  
from the cold lip of the grave  
and I am alive

to sing to you  
friends, play in his honor  
band of steady hearts

his anger like death  
passes in a moment  
his love lasts forever

cry yourself to sleep  
but when you awake  
light is all around you

I thought I was experienced  
nothing was going to shake me  
I was serious as a mountain

Lord, you were with me and then  
you were gone  
I looked for your face in terror

my body was made of clay  
My Lord, it is now  
I call you

what good is my blood my tears  
sinking in the mud  
is mere dust singing

can it speak  
these words on my tongue, Lord  
help me

turn my heavy sighing into dance  
unbutton my shirt and pants  
and wrap me in your glow

so my heart can find its voice  
through my lips to you  
warm and alive

rising  
above all bitterness  
high praises.



## Psalm 36

I  
Inside my heart I hear  
how arrogance talks  
to himself without fear

hidden from eyes  
he flatters himself  
but we see him on the faces

of false faces and words  
thinking—even asleep—  
how to squeeze love out

from feelings from words  
how to put wisdom on her back  
then hold his miniature knowledge back

your love fills a man, Lord  
with a kind of air  
making him lighter

he rises in measure of your judgment  
above the mountains of thought  
above the clouds of feeling

the strength of his measure stays  
in the eyes returning to mountains  
from the surface of the sea

he falls like any animal  
standing up only by your mercy  
his children grow in the shadow of your wings

feast on gourmet fare in your house  
with water that sparkles from wells  
beyond the reach of a mind

the fountain of life  
is lit  
by your light

you extend your embrace  
to those who feel you are there  
keep holding the loving

keep us from being crushed  
by arrogant feet  
by the hand of pride

the powerful are falling over themselves  
their minds have pulled them down  
there they will lie, flung down.

## Psalm 49

Now hear this, world  
all who live in air  
important, ordinary, poor

my lips are moved by a saying  
my heart whispers  
in sound sense

I measure with my ear  
this dark message and it opens  
around my lyre

why should I make fear  
dog my steps  
growl in my thoughts

when the masters of vanity  
breed in public for attention  
rolling in scraps of money

no man can build a way  
to God outside his body  
to buy his continual release

to pay a ransom in every moment  
for the gift of living  
the price higher than his power to think

so that he could live forever  
blind to his own falling  
into the pit of death

but we all can see  
the wisest man dies  
along with the cunningly petty

their fortunes pass like mumbled words  
among others  
above their graves

it is there in hardened silence  
the inheritors will join them  
their bodily measure of earth

and though they put their names  
on spaces of land,  
their inward thoughts like words,

the mouths wither around them—  
prosperous men  
lose their intelligence

remember that in its saying  
like animals who leave nothing to quote  
those men pass on totally self-centered

like sheep gathered into the earth  
their followers headlong after them  
death's herd

their flesh stripped in death's store  
and the big show made standing upright  
erased in the sunrise

but My Lord holds the ransom  
for death's vain embrace  
as this music holds me—inside

don't be afraid of the big man  
who builds a house that seems to grow  
to the pride of his family

nothing will lie between  
his body with its pride  
and the ground he falls to

the life he made happy for himself  
"so men may praise you  
in your prosperity"

will find the company  
of his fathers  
around him as total darkness

his inward thoughts like words  
the mouth withers around—  
prosperous men lose their intelligence.

## Psalm 58

Can this be justice  
this pen to hold  
they that move my arm

to follow them—blind stars?  
They think I have submitted  
to the vicious decorum of fame?

O generation come from dust  
O no: you steel yourselves  
to write; your hands

weigh, like a primitive scale,  
selfish desire unfulfilled . . .  
strangers from the womb

no sooner born and here  
than chasing after  
impulsive wishes

for which they will lie, cheat, kill.  
Cancerous cold desire  
gnaws in their brain

as the doctor  
the greatest virtuoso specialist  
numbs their consciousness

cutting into the chest  
exposing the vital organ  
totally blind to the truth.

Lord, cramp their fingers  
till the arms hang limp like sausage,  
grind down to sand

the teeth of the power-hungry  
and let their selves dissolve into it  
like ebbing tide on a junk-strewn beach

and when they in profound bitterness  
unsheathe the sharpened thought  
cut it out of their brain, Love!

make them disappear like snails  
slime of their bodies melting away  
or like babies, cord cut in abortion

to be thrown out as discharge  
eyes withered in the daylight  
though they never looked at it.

And let the children of greed like weeds  
be pulled from their homes  
and their parents blown away like milkweed . . .

The loving man will be revived  
by this revenge and step ashore  
from the bloodlust of the self-righteous

so that every man can say  
there is justice so deep  
a loving man has cause to sing.

## Psalm 73

My Lord is open  
to Israel, to all hearts  
within hearing

but I turned and  
almost fell                      moved  
by flattery spoken

through transparent shrouds  
impressing me  
with the power of imagery

and fame of the mind  
loving to strut  
in its mirror

with its unfelt body  
smooth as a machine  
without a care in the world

prosperous mouthpieces  
in their material cars  
of pride

and suits of status  
covering up  
crookedness

their eyes  
are walls  
for wish-images

their mouths big  
cynical  
megaphones

self-made gods  
whose words envelop the heads of men  
hiding their fears

they go through the world  
in self-encasing roles  
in which they will die

lowered in heavy caskets  
they made themselves  
out of words

but meanwhile they suck in  
most people  
draining their innocence

until everyone believes  
God isn't there  
no wonder these men prosper

they push through the world  
their violence  
makes them secure

it seemed I opened my heart  
and hand  
stupidly

every day had its torture  
every morning  
my nerves were exposed



I was tempted to hide  
to kill the moment  
with pride

instead I tried to know you  
and keep your song alive  
but my mind was useless

until my heart opened  
the cosmic door  
to a continual presence

that is you  
lighting the future  
above the highway

down which self-flattering men  
travel in style  
to prisons of mind-locked time

they have their pleasures  
cruelly pursued  
and you urge them

to their final reward  
you let them rise on dead bodies  
so they have to fall

like a bad dream  
the moment you awake  
they are gone forever

my mind was dry thought  
my feelings drained  
through dusty clay

I was blindly  
eating through life  
like a moth in wool

I was crude  
too proud  
to know you

yet continually with you  
take my hand  
in love

it sings with you  
inspired advice  
leading to your presence

what will I want  
but continual inspiration  
in the present with you

what else will I find  
in the blues of the sky  
but you

and me in you  
where am I in what universe  
without you

my body dies of exhaustion  
but you are the mountain  
lifting my open heart

higher than a mind can go  
into the forever  
into the future

men who hide in their hearts  
have bitter minds  
they will lose

those people become no one  
leaving you for an ideology  
for a material car

but I waited for you  
I was open, My Lord  
to find my song

I found you here  
in music I continue  
to hear

with each new breath  
expanding  
to give me space.

## Psalm 82

My Lord is the judge  
at the heart  
in the infinite

speaking through time and space  
to all gods  
he let be

“instead of lips  
smoothed by success  
and appearances

defend your silent critic  
locked in barred categories  
his conscience

painfully opened  
by vicious systems  
release him

let him speak  
break the grip  
of the prosperous

whose things enclose them  
from the lightness of knowledge  
the openness of understanding

they build in darkness  
burying justice  
digging at the foundation

of earth and men  
the orbit  
of trust''

I was thinking  
you too are gods  
heads of nations

thoughts of My Lord  
but you will disappear  
like the spirit you silence

your heads fall  
like great nations  
in ruins

My Lord, open  
their consciousness  
to share your judgment

all nations are men  
you hear  
beyond categories.

## Psalm 90

Lord, you are our home  
in all time  
from before the mountains rose

or even the sun  
from before the universe  
to after the universe

you are Lord forever  
and we are home  
in your flowing

you turn men into dust  
and you ask them to return  
children of men

for a thousand years  
in your eyes  
are a single day

yesterday  
already passed  
into today

defend your silent critic  
locked in barred categories  
his conscience

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yesterday  
already passed  
into today

a ship in the night  
while we were present  
in a human dream

submerged  
in the flood of sleep  
appearing in the morning

like new grass  
growing into afternoon  
cut down by evening

we are swept off our feet  
in an unconscious wind  
of war or nature

or eaten away  
with anxiety  
worried to death

worn-out swimmers  
all dressed up  
in the social whirl

you see our little disasters  
secret lusts  
broken open in the light

of your eyes  
in the openness  
penetrating our lives

every day melts away  
before you  
our years run away



into a sigh  
at the end  
of a story

over in another breath  
seventy years  
eighty—gone in a flash

and what was it?  
a tinderbox of vanity  
a show of pride

and we fly apart  
in the empty mirror  
in the spaces between stars

in the total explosion of galaxies  
how can we know ourselves  
in this human universe

without expanding  
to the wonder that you are  
infinite lightness

piercing my body  
this door of fear  
to open my heart

our minds are little stars  
brief flares  
darkness strips naked

move us to see your present  
as we're moved to name each star  
lighten our hearts with wonder

return  
and forgive us  
locking our unconscious

behind the door  
and as if it isn't there  
as if we forget we're there

we walk into space unawed  
unknown to ourselves  
years lost in thought

a thousand blind moments  
teach us when morning comes  
to be moved

to see ourselves rise  
returning witnesses  
from the deep unconscious

and for every day lost  
we find a new day  
revealing where we are

in the future and in the past  
together again  
this moment with you

made human for us  
to see your work  
in the open-eyed grace of children

the whole vision unlocked  
from darkness  
to the thrill of light

where our hands reach for another's  
opening to life  
in our heart's flow

the work of this hand  
flowing open  
to you and from you.

## Psalm 101

The city of your love  
sings through me  
before you, My Lord

you hold my writing hand  
that makes my living  
creative act

won't you come to me?  
I sit here in my house  
with an open heart

no willful image  
blocks the door,  
I just won't see

the theatrics of personality  
crowding  
the openness you allow

this art that hurts  
those with ears for only jewelry  
they go far away

locked within themselves  
their self-flattery  
I've reduced to silence

their narrow eyes  
inflated pride  
blown away

I'm always looking  
for your people  
to share this space

the contact of imagination  
inspired  
by necessity

beyond the stage doors  
of weak characters  
cut off from real streets

no more precious actors  
costumed in sound  
to litter this town with clichés

every morning  
I silence with your light  
desperate images

they run away  
from the city of your name  
that calls an open heart.

## Psalm 121

I look up and find a mountain  
to know inside  
then light appears

inspired from most high  
My Lord, creator  
of earth and sky

we shall not be moved  
this power inside  
never fell asleep

over Israel  
My Lord is in the light  
the atmosphere

the power that moves my hand  
through the sunlight that doesn't melt me  
and by the moonlight

that moves us inside  
to be inspired  
above burning pride

*desire*  
which is the mountain of our life  
held in his air

and by his hand  
we're free  
to be moved

we may come and go  
from now  
to forever.

## Psalm 130

I am drowning  
deep in myself, Lord  
I'm crying

I'm calling you  
hear this voice, Lord  
find me in your ears

the mercy of your attention  
as it looks through the shell  
of my selfishness

if you see only  
vain impulses  
marking the body's surface

the lines in the face  
then there is no one  
who'd hold up his head

but you allow us forgiveness  
allow a song  
coming through us

to you  
as I call to you  
as I rely on these words

as I wait  
for you  
more certain than dawn

through the steady ticking till morning  
wait, Israel  
even when watches seem to stop

My Lord comes to me  
in a rush of love  
setting my heart free

into a bright sky  
we are lightened  
in the mercy of his attention.

## Psalm 133

**I**t's so good, the turn of a season  
people living for a moment as equals  
secure in the human family

as sweet as spring rain  
making the beard silky  
Aaron's beard

his robes sparkle  
rich with heaven's simple jewels  
like the crown of dew

on Lebanon's Mt. Hermon  
shared equally on the hills  
of Israel

where the Lord graces our eyes  
fresh from reborn wonder  
as if we'd live forever.

## Psalm 137

I  
nto the rivers of Babylon  
we cried like babies, loud  
unwilling to move

beyond the memory  
the flowing blood  
of you, Israel

to an orchestra of trees  
we lent our harps  
silently leaning

when the enemy shoved us  
“asking” tender songs of Israel  
under heavy chains

“give us songs of Israel!”  
as if we could give our mouths  
to a strange landlord . . .

If I forget thee  
sweet Jerusalem  
let my writing hand wither

my tongue freeze to ice  
sealing up my voice  
my mind numb as rock



if I forget  
your kiss  
Jerusalem on my lips . . .

My Lord  
remembers you, Edomites  
Jerusalem raped vivid as daylight

you who screamed to strip her  
strip her naked  
to the ground

O Lady Babylon  
Babylon the destroyer  
lucky man who holds you

who crushes you  
who opens your mind  
to wither instantly in air

who holds up your crying babies  
as if to stun them  
against solid rock.

## Psalm 139

There's nothing in me, My Lord  
that doesn't open to your eyes  
you know me when I sit

you note when I arise  
in the darkest closet of my thought  
there is an open window of sunshine for you

you walk with me  
lie down with me  
at every move await me

at every pause  
you know the words  
my tongue will print in air

if I say yes  
you have already nodded  
no—and you have shaken your head

in any doubts I lose my way  
I find your hand  
on me

such knowledge so high  
I can never reach with a mind  
or hold any longer than a breath

to get away from you  
I could let my imagination fly  
but you would hold it in your sky

or I could sleep with the dead in the ground  
but your fire from the depths  
would awaken me

I could fly on gold ray of sun  
from dawn in east  
west to stars of night

and your hand  
would point the way  
and your right hand hold me steady

however close I pull the night around me  
even at midnight  
day strips me naked

in your tender sight  
black and white  
are one—all light

you who put me together  
piece by piece in the womb  
from light

that work shines  
through the form of my skeleton  
on my song of words

you watched as my back steadied  
the still-soft fuselage of ribs  
in primitive studio deep within

you saw me as putty  
a life unfashioned  
a plane at the bottom of the sea

and the great book of its life  
this embryo will write  
in a body you have sculpted

My Lord—your thoughts  
high and precious  
beyond logic like stars

or like grains of sand I try to count  
I fall asleep and awake  
on the beach of your making

My Lord—stop the breath  
of men who live by blood  
alone and lie to your face

who think they can hide  
behind the same petty smile  
they use to smear your name

My Lord—you hear me hate  
back your haters  
with total energy

concentrated  
in one body  
that is yours and mine

My Lord—look at me  
to see my heart  
test me—to find my mind

if any bitterness lives here  
lead me out  
into the selfless open.





## On Translating the Psalms

The psalms of the Bible are almost invisible to readers of modern literature today, and most readers of the Bible are as out of touch with the sheer poetry of the psalms as with modern poetry itself. This book is a poet's attempt to re-speak the psalms, to rediscover their quality of spokenness in modern poetic terms. In a way these versions are an offspring of modern biblical scholarship, which has thrown new light on early Hebrew language.

The psalms first struck me as needing a new translation precisely because of the awkwardness with modern poetry shown by modern Bible translators. I was reading a traditional Hebrew edition of the psalms from my father's bookshelf. The accompanying English translations seemed so "off." I came across one which seemed to draw on an incredible sexual image all the way through. The imagery of snakes and snakecharmers and everything else was just right, but it wasn't coherent because the translators were unconscious of the poem's inner form and flow. The language was so conceptualized for the sake of rhetorical effect that the imagery seemed irrelevant. I was thinking of them as poems then, not psalms, and that's how I began.

One of the clearest insights I've had into the role of the modern poet followed my father's death. I'd sent my father my first psalm attempts, and later I found he'd shown them to his rabbi. At the funeral chapel the rabbi, standing in front of my father's open coffin, read one of my psalms for the eulogy. I had to listen to him read it over the loudspeakers on that literal level, as prayer, and that's how the audience heard it. I was feeling painfully sad at the time, but I could hear that he didn't catch my phrasing and that he ignored my lines,

echoing the rhythm and syntax of the King James translation. My ear cringed when I heard it like that: the music flattened and the whole, as I'd interpreted it, unraveled. On the other hand it was a humbling experience because I realized the literal strength of the original as almost-disembodied liturgy. A living poet can rarely expect to hear his work like that, ancient and new in the same breath, while he himself is part of a rapt audience.

My own attempts were a constant surprise. It was almost as if something would take my hand or mind and give me the shape of the whole poem—a shape I got not only from looking at many different texts, but from sensing the ancient, utterly lost original behind them: “utterly” in the sense of spoken. The original psalms became clearer to me as liturgy when I explored other English versions and the impossibility of literally speaking them. The modern three-line stanza I was using echoed for me both the original parallelism of ancient poetry and the basically triadic construction of the blues, which in turn is derived from gospel spirituals, a form of American liturgy. As I thought of the latter, I recognized a similarity between the “stone-righteous” blues man and the psalmist: a resistance to superstition, cynicism, and self-righteousness, without the pretense of perfectly transcending them; a desire not to sound smarter than one is, and to let one's heaviest feelings resonate in a gentle irony and become lightened in a harmonics of repetition. I had explored modes of this blues phrasing and stanza for years in my earlier work, beginning with what I'd learned from modern practitioners like William Carlos Williams.

There is an uncompromising spirit in the best modern poetry that confuses many people, and they conclude that the individualism of experimenting poets is a complete break with tradition. This conclusion is superficial because it ignores the element of vision. The best poets of any age reshape the mud of inertia into a hard clarity which may offend the squeamish. For instance, many people today may be shocked to discover how familiarly modern the absence of punctuation and conventional syntax is in the original psalms.

As the psalmist responded to a spiritual chord with the



direct speech of dialogue, the post-romantic poet has listened to speech patterns with the intensity of meditation. I worked toward a sense of wholeness for each individual psalm, using modern sources of imagery, stanza, line and rhythm, idiom and syntax. It was an experiment, and I explored earlier experiments in translation by poets from Philip Sidney and John Milton to Dante Rossetti. But these works were based on a Christian vision of the Old Testament, and, with the exception of Milton, these poets were in the dark about the almost-primitive originals.

I was led to Christian commentaries on the psalms, beginning with Saint Augustine's monumental work. Like Milton, I then turned to Jewish sources, to rabbinic commentary. Then to historical and textual studies—and here I became aware of modern scholarship and vast new sources in linguistic and archeological discoveries. I became involved in tracking the reconstruction of the original texts of the psalms, and even to the conjectured oral sources beyond. Modern psychological interpretations of the Old Testament, like those of Freud, Jung, and the sociologist Max Weber, tempered by inspired scholars like Buber, Heschel, and C. S. Lewis, helped me penetrate further into the past and its roots in our consciousness today. I tried to focus on the internal form of the psalms, their original lyric unity, and my versions attempt to break through to the original Hebrew and to parallel it, intuitively, in a modern form.

At first I was unsure of what to call these attempts because the religious idea of poetic inspiration is different from the traditional literary one. From a spiritual point of view, translation is a higher art than interpretation; from that point of view what's serious is what's literally spoken under the highest inspiration, as if it were the literal word dictated by the spirit—only the most inspired poet can translate it. The psalms, as they're read in the context of the Bible, are liturgical, the essence of literal language, almost a science of what is literal in spirit. So to call my work "interpretation" may seem to the orthodox mind to isolate it from a liturgical setting, from its reality of spirit.

I wanted to translate the form of the literal psalm, not the

precise words, but the original atmosphere. Of course, there's no sure way to tell how I've succeeded or failed, and I'm content to consider them personal interpretations. Still, they are *attempts* at literal translation, from a sense of the lost ancient originals into the form of a psalm or hymn, a poem of "public meditation." I try for the atmosphere of completeness with the limited inspiration I can get from the tradition of modern secular poetry and its drive toward a literal expression of feeling, an immediacy of author's presence in the process of listening to himself speaking.

I didn't start with that grand an idea. I was just interested in how the psalms would sound as spoken poetry. I thought they would come out sounding very light in terms of unsophisticated ideas of coherence but odd, the way primitive works of art are, especially because I was attempting to focus on the early Hebrew as opposed to the Latin, Greek, or Masoretic Hebrew versions (although this traditional Hebrew text set down in medieval times is remarkable in its preservation of an already ancient poetics). The language of the later versions is more conceptualized than the originals. It is *there* that the density of imagery and inspired word-play is watered down; and the translations were not made by poets, who might be more sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of the language they are translating *into*. It's a different story when you listen to poets. Even though Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke were working from the Latin, they were trying to establish a form, a formal whole, in the spirit of Renaissance exploration. They were experimenting in their own language, a relatively new language then, as Hebrew was for the psalmists.

Modern exploration by poets and artists has gone a long way toward reestablishing contact with primitive imagery. The ancient Hebrew poets built a "parallel" imagery that is similar to the modern texture of collage. It is not the kind of linear imagery in the Christian tradition of Western literature out of Greece and Rome. T. S. Eliot was applying collage to that tradition in "The Waste Land" more than a half-century ago. Parallel imagery comes up often in the psalms,

where a composite series of images creates, not a tapestry, but a psychological atmosphere of reality.

As Apollinaire, for example, applied it in his poetry, collage is an extension of the metaphor. It suggests the expansive feeling of an infinite range of combinations of images, mirroring the universe as we now tend to see it and as the psalmists first felt it. Their work conveys the strangeness but also the human response to the beauty of a universe beyond us: within, without. Poets have become free to explore the boundaries of poetic form as well as its metaphorical relationship to the boundaries of self, and I applied my experience to the integrity of each psalm. Just as we've begun to realize the scope a technique like collage opens to us, modern biblical scholarship has realized the vast range of subtleties behind the ancient technique of parallelism.

Although the original psalms are formally intricate, the speaking voice always penetrates the texture. Likewise, the flexibility of common speech in poetry today puts the spotlight on phrasing, especially since collage opened up the field of imagery. And in a way the process of becoming a poet involves listening for one's voice in the texture of phrasing. In fact it is often the texture of a pattern of phrasing that unifies a modern poem, and this is what makes it possible to identify today with the poetic context of a Hebrew psalm. As the psalmist discovers a higher plane in the faith of his own voice, the modern poet is also a discoverer, a listener, and no longer the romantic inventor from scratch he or she once seemed to be. The psychological situation of the poet struggling with himself (no longer calling on a Greek muse) parallels the psalmist's dialogue-struggle with his God—the faith in a higher order or music lifts the poem out of monologue. A truly original poem today is almost an act of faith itself as it moves toward discovering its own inclusive form.

As a poet, then, I'm both speaking and listening to myself speak. I recognize that I, personally, have nothing startlingly "new" to say. And so I become a transmitter, as was the original psalmist in his anonymity. He amplified a communal body of knowledge which very much did have something to

say, going back to the oral tradition from which poetry comes; he was a translator into poetry, and that's where I find myself with the psalms today. The history of modern poetry records a disaffection with the classical traditions and a re-encounter with the primitive origins of society, an exploration of the roots of poetry itself, both psychologically and historically. Confronting the psalms in their literal context, one realizes how difficult it is to conceive of a universe for which poetry is a way to speak directly and openly. We have to create the context ourselves, in each poem, in which we can speak openly. And in that act is the tendency to overdraw our originality and obscure our calling.

In the psalms, the play is not in what's being said but in becoming aware of the total surrounding context—a kind of light irony that the parallel imagery reflects on human presence in a divine atmosphere. Sometimes I had to fight the impulse in my versions to use a line that sounded witty or heavily ironic. This consciousness of how we sound when we're *being* ironic made me keep in mind the example of lightness in the *Divine Comedy* as it explodes irony: every time one thinks the poet is being incredibly ironic, he goes a step further, until the atmosphere is lightened. And that atmosphere of self-conscious realism goes back to early Hebrew civilization—the feeling that one's purpose is to witness and not to be some theoretical or supernatural agent, that poetry is a feat of consciousness. Expanding one's consciousness doesn't mean violent life-change; it means continually adjusting oneself to an awareness of reality—to speak and to listen in concert, to lighten the burden of self-consciousness.

In modern poetry, I learned a sophisticated equivalent of the blues from the work of Gertrude Stein. She explored the psychological effects of repetition and demonstrated the spirit that links poetry, meditation, and liturgy. Her example shattered a fashionable cynicism, helping to establish the positive discipline of a head-on, self-effacing confrontation with the most serious qualities of lightness. The thoroughness of her experiments were also an inspiration for me to plunge deeper into biblical studies.

When I started to work on the psalms, I didn't want to go

too deeply into biblical research, I didn't want to wrestle with the broader context of authenticity. I was satisfied my versions were little translation experiments. My personal awareness of the psalms as liturgy overtook me while I was translating one that I thought was written in anger and which is usually translated as if it was. I suddenly realized it was not anger at all but an intense depression, a self-conscious awareness of failure. The psalmist was facing depression and not allowing himself to respond with bitterness. Instead, even as his voice speaks bitterly, he overcomes despair with his song's urge toward lightness. Its formal repetitiveness parallels the strength of his faith in a higher being whose ear he approaches as he listens to himself.

David Rosenberg

August, 1974  
New York, New York



DAVID  
ROSENBERG

JOB  
SPEAKS



The Book of Job in *A Poet's Bible*

David Rosenberg has translated the speeches of Job into stirring, contemporary language.

With his previous book, **Blues of the Sky**, Rosenberg won wide acclaim from literary critics and Bible scholars alike. Now, in his new work, the timeless words of Job are resounded in a rich, modern voice. Too often the humanness of Job's dialogues has been overborne by the magnificence of God's reply to him. But here, as **Job Speaks**, his penetrating questions and struggles with fate are revealed as our own as well.

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"After many years a poet has translated biblical poetry into the language, into the living body, of a vital tradition. We are allowed, then, to read or experience Job through our mouths, through our legs marking Job's dance: through the physicality of idiom and sound that the poet and his tradition give body to."

—From the foreword by  
DONALD HALL

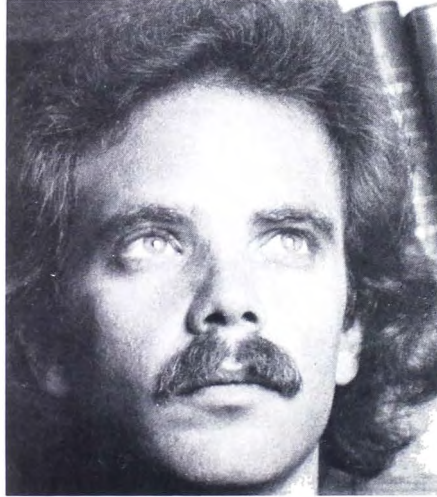
"Genuinely exciting. A major project from both a literary and religious view-  
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*(continued from front flap)*

point; David Rosenberg is restoring to the Bible the poetry it had at the beginning and in the process is evolving a modern religious language."

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*Michael McKenzie*

Born in Detroit in 1943, **David Rosenberg** has published ten books of poetry and gives many readings from his work. In 1976 Harper & Row published **Blues of the Sky**, his translations from the Book of Psalms. Mr. Rosenberg was a Graduate Fellow in Poetry at Syracuse University and at the University of Essex, England. He taught writing at York University in Toronto and at the City University of New York, and has often been a visiting poet-in-residence. Mr. Rosenberg recently completed a translation of the Book of Isaiah as part of *A Poet's Bible* series.

*Jacket design by Luba Litwak*

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# Comments on the first volume in *A Poet's Bible*:

## BLUES OF THE SKY

Interpreted from the Original Hebrew Book of Psalms

“Moving and full of skill. Unlike most non-poets drawn to poetic texts, David Rosenberg has taken his own practice into his translation to make it sing.”

**Bill Zavatsky**

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“Gives the ancient Psalms a directness and immediacy that would have delighted the original authors, succeeding in making the Psalms come alive.”

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“With more courage than most poets now could even imagine, David Rosenberg has made psalms that are genuine contemporary poems, yet still embedded in the ancient Hebrew sources. But they are not poems alone; rather, they are not what we customarily mean by poems today, dominantly subjective lyrics, for Rosenberg has not forgotten that the psalms were the ‘songs of the tribe,’ a *liturgy*. The psalms were for and of the community, and in Rosenberg’s translation they still are.”

**Hayden Carruth**

*Bookletter*

Harper & Row, Publishers

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# JOB SPEAKS



# JOB SPEAKS

*Interpreted from the  
Original Hebrew Book of Job*

DAVID ROSENBERG

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A POET'S BIBLE

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## Foreword to David Rosenberg's *Job*

**T**ranslations, as everyone knows, need redoing generation by generation. The dead must breathe again through live mouths. In the last decades, American poets have translated and retranslated with passion and inspiration, stepping to tunes borrowed from old Greek and Chinese, from new Spanish and Swedish. When poets have done the work, the dead have danced to new and foreign measure. (When un-poets undo the work, the dead remain safely dead; they know their place.) We live perhaps in a time of poetic translation, of new bodily connections among races and centuries of men.

But in modern times translation of Western religious poetry has remained largely unattempted. We learn the Buddhist gaze; we largely ignore the speech of our ancient fathers. As if this galactic portion of Western experience, this vast history of spiritual intercessions, divine and human mixed in the language of poetic inspiration, were on a secular index of the mid-twentieth century; as if holy utterance were embarrassing; as if Jehovah were become Prince Albert, to be tucked away in a monument.

When new translators have rendered the poetry of the Old Testament into modern idiom, the act has been reductive or even condescending, based on the notion that our idiom is a falling away from the prose structures available to seventeenth-century scholars. Surely the idiom of the Elizabethan streets was richer than the idiom of the twentieth-century academy, and the idiom of the Jacobean Court was richer than the idiom of the current American presidency.

But when we translate into an idiom, we choose one of many idioms available to us. In our society—maybe always, maybe in all societies—there are varieties of idiom, and new translators of the Bible have opted for the blandest, the most institutional, the least traditional.

*David Rosenberg has been for some years a poet to watch, even to contend with, if you are in the habit of watching or contending with poets. I have followed his work for more than a decade, aware that it grew in assurance and bravery, learning its own lilt and tone and expansiveness. I followed as well his ambitious editing—a magazine called Ant's Forefoot—first from Toronto, later from the poetic energy-center of New York's Lower East Side. David Rosenberg's strength of mind, wit, and intelligence have devoted themselves to poetry in America.*

*Then he seemed to change. He didn't change, but he seemed to change. He began to translate some Psalms—published in 1976 as Blues of the Sky—in a poetry that took on ancient spirit in the powerful idiom of modern American discoveries. He became an ancient Hebrew religious poet writing in the rhythms of the United States.*

*"With Walt Whitman as a helpful guide," says David Rosenberg in his afterword, "I found my way back to the ancient Hebrew poets of The Bible."*

*Not only Whitman was his guide, as he acknowledges. I hear Pound, Williams, Zukofsky, Black Mountain, H. D.: all of them modernist American poets, of whom Walt Whitman, paradoxically and undeniably, is first and greatest.*

*So after many years a poet has translated biblical poetry into the language, into the living body, of a vital tradition. A poet uses the rich, common speech of modern America, refined and organized by poetic tradition. David Rosenberg gives himself over to Job as a man in his own time and space, but brings with him for speech the refinements and inventions that have developed in more than a century of American poems. We are allowed, then, to read or experience Job through our ears, through our mouths, through our legs marking Job's dance: through the physicality of idiom and sound that the poet and his tradition give body to.*

*September 20, 1976*

*Donald Hall  
Wilmot, N.H.*

# JOB SPEAKS



## Preface

The poet who composed the *Book of Job*, probably in the seventh century B.C., did not invent the story, but adapted it from legend. Almost everybody knows the legend today, whether or not they have read the biblical poem. But the real story of Job is not in the legend; it's in the telling itself, the dramatic emotion that deepens in intensity, beauty, and strangeness as the poem progresses.

The poem remains moving because the strangeness of Job's conversation with a difficult God is not alien to us. It is a persistence toward the open, foreshadowing an acceptance of the unknown, that leads us to rise in recognition of a truth beyond the individuality of our eyes, one we can't see but only feel beyond us in the power of metaphor. As we continue to understand our relatively small place in the universe, our pride in being human needs the reassurance of Job's outspoken conscience, as he faces physical and psychological demands that hold a full-length mirror to our imagination.

Most of Job's story is given in a few narrative passages beginning and ending the book; the bulk of the writing, beginning with the third chapter, becomes a dialogue between Job and a few friends, followed by God's answer from the whirlwind. The speeches of Job's friends are not as substantial as Job's, and Job's speeches reflect their arguments. His resistance to rigid dogma prevails in the end; as Maimonides wrote a thousand years ago in his *The Guide of The Perplexed*, "You will find that in the prophetic revelation that came to Job and through which his error in everything that he had imagined became clear to him, there is no going beyond the description of natural matters—namely, description of the elements or description of the meteorological phenomena or

description of the natures of the various species of animals, but of nothing else. For what is mentioned therein in the way of a description of the firmaments and the heavens and *Orion* and *the Pleiades* occur because of their influence upon the atmosphere."

Job's speeches carry the essence of the whole book: feeling based in experience. They ebb and flow in intensity as the book does in its entirety. Just as the history of Israel has provided a testament to the experienced joys and despairs of community, we can experience unspeakable suffering and faith through the Joban poet's transmission of a deep, fierce love of individual conscience that is Job in his speeches.

So I have decided just to translate Job's speeches. Like many scholars have suggested, I feel they are the original heart of the book. I feel as though the original Joban poet returned to other parts of the poem at different stages of his life, that the complete *Book of Job* was his life's work as *Leaves of Grass* was Whitman's.

Job Speaks





## Chapter 3

Rip up the day I was born  
and the night that furnished a bed  
with people to make me

the pillow from every night I lived  
smother that day        cover its light  
so God can forget it

let death's shadow  
hold the ether mask there  
clouds obliterate it

a total eclipse  
blackout  
swallow it a tiny pill

and that sweat that night beginning me  
black oil absorb it  
a hole drilled deep in calendars

shrivel that night in the hand of history  
let it soften in impotence  
turn off its little shouts of pleasure

every science unsex it  
genetic biology        advanced psychology  
nuclear bomb

no next morning shine on it  
through the afterglow  
singeing the eyelids of dawn

because it didn't shut the door  
of the womb on me  
to hide my eyes from pain

why couldn't I have been  
a lucky abortion  
why were there two knees

waiting for me  
two breasts to suck  
without them I could have stayed asleep

I could have melted away  
like spilled semen  
in transparent air

wrapped up in quiet dust  
with gods of power and influence  
and the emptiness of their palaces

with rich families their money  
paper houses  
for plastic children

with criminals who can't break loose  
there they rest with tired workers  
no more hell from bosses or jailers

who all fall down  
under one blanket  
not the simplest machine to serve them

why should someone have to live  
locked in a miserable spotlight  
bitter inside

waiting for a death far off  
they search for it restlessly  
like the final person in a late-night bar

they can't wait to see the iron gate unlock  
and the little grave plot  
comforts them

why should someone have to walk around  
blinded by the daylight  
he can't wave off

that God throws on him  
waiting at every exit  
in front of me

a table of sighs to eat  
and moaning  
poured out like water

every horror I imagined  
walks right up to me  
no privacy no solitude

and my pain  
with my mind  
pushes rest aside.

## Chapter 6

W<sub>eigh</sub> my anguish  
heave my misery on that scale  
heavier than a planet

a scale filled with sand  
that's how words fail me  
God's arrows spinning past me

poisoning my spirit  
wearing me away  
little petty arguments

would you like only egg whites  
no salt to season  
every meal

the soul blanches  
dizzy at the sight  
of my own white flesh

I hope God will change this prayer  
white paper hope  
to violence of reality

crush me  
snip off my life  
paper

what a relief  
I'd leap with delight  
that departing train of pain

knowing I broke no law  
but where to get some strength to wait  
cold patience

a head of stone  
skin of metal  
nerves frozen dead

no help from inside  
I can't reach in there  
anymore

sick spirit  
my dear friends  
disappearing frightened nurses

and snow falls  
over mouths of pure water  
hidden high in mountains

of themselves  
sheer ice cliffs  
face my simple thirst

spring comes  
they dry up  
fast as a mirage

caravans lost  
looking for what they thought  
new roads

new places  
fresh faces  
tricked

by nature's technology  
human nature's  
idiocy

and that's how you look at me friends  
panicked  
into your empty words

do I say give me  
things or money  
save me from enemy

pay my dues for me  
so talk straight I listen  
at my open mistake

honesty so easy to take  
but not the "advice"  
unsheathed metal

to pain me with words  
and deaf to mine  
the wind blows away

do you lecture disaster victims  
high-pressure a friend  
stab love full of arguments

now look at me  
face into face  
no place here to glibly hide

think again—your thinking stopped  
as in a blind spot  
you passed my integrity

my face wide open  
as I speak  
my tongue there true

not as if I couldn't taste  
bitter fruit  
my words in my mouth.

## Chapter 7

We're all somebody's workers  
in a big factory  
grasping for breaks

reaching for paychecks and prizes  
here I'm paid these empty months  
heavy nights awarded

to lie down and wait  
for getting up  
dragged through toss and turnings

body dressed in a texture of scars  
little white worms of skin  
while days run on smoothly

through a tape recorder  
to run out  
beyond machine of hope

mouth making a little wind  
eyes straining harder  
to finally disappear

in front of others' eyes  
as clouds breaking up  
we fall beneath the ground

we don't go home again  
house doesn't know me  
so nothing holds me back here

listen to this mind in pain  
this "educated" soul  
in words it complains

am I some Frankenstein  
to be guarded  
can't go to sleep alone

find some dream waiting  
to terrify me  
break my neck

only to find it there again  
why not a hand instead  
to really choke me

shake hands with despair friends  
I have all day  
it's all one little breath



so leave me alone God  
why think up a man  
think so much of one

to open it for inspection  
every morning  
test it every breath

look over there  
somewhere other  
give me just one free moment

to swallow my spit  
what did I do to hurt you  
man watcher

what can you be making  
what cosmic thought  
I'm necessary for

you hold me here  
insignificant comma  
like a tie in a railroad track

why not forgive  
forget  
I'll just settle down in dust here

you won't have to think  
to even look  
for me.

## Chapter 9

However true  
we don't know how to win a case  
against God

for every question we'd ask  
there are a thousand  
over our heads

however high and headstrong  
who among us       heart of stone  
is hard enough to resist him

he picks up a mountain  
it doesn't even know it  
and throws it down

when he's angry  
he gives the earth a little kick  
and it trembles

he brews up a storm  
to hide the sun  
erase the stars

he laid the universe out  
on the blackboard of space  
alone with himself

he paced up and down  
thinking something  
that charmed the primitive sea

his thoughts clear as stars  
laid on the surface  
of a calm sea

he passes by  
and we don't see him  
as our heads swell with impressions

each day  
sometimes bitter  
we'd say "wait, wait a minute,

what are you doing?"  
but he has passed us  
long ago

all the gods of human history  
couldn't raise a whisper  
to slow him down

so what could I say  
to turn him  
around

even if I'm right  
even if he heard  
a little murmur of human truth

it would only be irritating  
stopping him for even a moment  
he'd knock the breath out of me

as he brushed  
a fleck of soot  
or tear from his eyes

(he is the means  
to make justice  
his end)

I could be right  
and my mouth  
would say something wrong

totally innocent  
and my words  
wrap around me

in a cloak of pride  
but I'm innocent  
I don't care about myself

I don't know my life  
as if it makes any difference  
we're all destroyed together

guilty            not guilty  
some disaster strikes  
mixing innocence with despair

and someone is laughing at his experiment  
the whole world is wrapped  
in a cloak of pride

like a prize scientist  
of pride            white and clean  
it's all a desperate show

the faces of our judges are covered  
with the gauze  
for this human play

and he made it            you  
who can prove  
I'm a liar

my days print out  
faster than a computer  
they're gone like Western Union boys

fleeing from the horror  
of "progress"  
exploded bombs

if I say  
I'll put on a happy face  
grit my teeth grin and bear it

some inner torture takes over  
every time            I can hardly believe it  
you'll never let me go!

my life is a sentence  
why should I struggle  
in these chains of words

I could wash my mouth with soap  
my hands in lye  
and you'd drop me into some ditch

and I'd fall on my face  
until I couldn't even laugh  
or challenge his force

I'd hate myself  
as if all my clothes  
turned into prisoner's clothes

he isn't a man  
with a hand to put a summons in  
was I ever in a court

can my mind come up with a court  
some kind of referee or witness  
to step between us

let him put down that club  
that terror of naked space  
he holds over me

then I could find myself  
put on consciousness openly  
but he won't let me be.

## Chapter 10

My soul is sick of life  
pushes me to speak  
to fill the air with wounds

don't leave me hanging God  
let me see the case  
against me            is there honor

just to cut me down  
to think so little of the work  
that flowed from your hands

that you sit back watching the mean  
arrogantly misshapened  
bask in the spotlight

and can you see through the tiny eyes of men  
eyes of flesh  
in the little prism of a day

are your years our years  
that you make me suffer in  
that you enter to turn upside down

though you only you know I'm guiltless  
where could I escape  
beneath your hand

hands that molded me alive  
and now reach in to crush me—  
remember the mud you cupped for me

it's only the same dust I can return to  
the dust on the bottle of milk  
you poured me out of

worked me up into something solid  
like rich cheese  
wrapped in a beautiful skin

and inside the dream architecture of bones  
you filled me with breath and vision  
a vision of reality a love

but you cloud these things in a mind  
of your own  
a sky I know the stars stretch back from

containing all time forever  
you surround me with clouds  
like a lens

to see if I will  
with this little mirror of a mind  
think I can escape

cloud myself in nerve  
and if I do—God help me  
and if I'm innocent I better not look up

drunk with shame  
drenched in this misery  
of myself

if I stand up you come to me  
cold as a camera  
your pictures are marvelous pictures

they multiply your anger toward me  
frame after frame  
an army of moments against me

why did you pull me through the womb  
locked into the brutal focus of time  
I could have died inside never breathed

no one come to look at me  
a quick blur in the world  
carried stillborn from womb to tomb



so few days this life  
why not just leave me alone  
let me smile a little while

before I go off never to return  
into the deep shadow of death  
utter darkness—the thing itself

stripped of the background darkness  
into the flaming  
sun of darkness.

## Chapter 12

Of course you're all so cultured  
when you die (what a loss)  
wisdom dies with you

but I have a mind too  
working just like yours  
who doesn't anyway?

yet you come by almost laughing  
at a man who called out God  
and was answered

and in that innocence  
I'm an idiot in a showcase  
for all those comfortably hidden

in the things they've accumulated  
a sideshow in a pit  
for you thinking you're not trapped

looking down on me as if I'd slipped  
out of weakness        out of love  
for an immaterial illusion

a dreamy escape  
while thieves pile up things in their houses        any  
sneers behind his mask at God

secure in his heartless estate  
anything his hand can grab onto  
is god enough for him

look at his dog or cat  
and think where they came from  
the pigeons flocking in the park will tell you

look at the ground and it will tell you  
with the flowers on its blanket  
covering over ages of living things

fish in the sea will speak to you  
as you have to me bloated with words  
you mouth as if you've learned

learned to mouth without feeling  
we all everything swim from God's hand  
everything we make with our hands

he put in front of us  
and in time ahead of us  
as we begin from little fish with tails

don't our mouths know what food is  
and what tastes foreign  
as our ears know what words

swim to the heart  
does it matter how long we've lived  
do we pile up wisdom in our nets

or do we dip them again every day in the river  
because wisdom flows only from God  
he feeds the mind

if he breaks a living thing apart  
we can't rebuild it  
if he shuts the door on a man

there is nothing there to open  
no rain and the earth dries up  
he lets the water loose we're immersed

he's the source of energy and reflection: wisdom  
the power-mad and the slave  
dissolve to the same source dissolve in the mirror

and if he wishes  
the wise are stripped of their wisdom  
judges go mad in their courtrooms

the belt of power slips from the wearer  
clothes don't fit them  
like poor men in mental wards

priests are stripped and led away  
money slips through the hands of the rich  
like water

those most full of confidence  
lose their voices  
men we trust lose their senses

heirs and those next in line  
have contempt poured on their heads  
mantles of power shrink out of shape

the muscles of strongmen are water—  
death plots spawned in the dark  
are totally exposed

like negatives to light  
death's shadow is immersed  
in light

he swells nations to greatness  
then deflates them  
a nation is swept off its feet

the minds of its leaders are blown away  
scattered like old newspapers  
blown through a cemetery

they grope for some kind of light switch  
in an ancient tomb  
they flail like men overboard

drunk on their own power  
they stagger toward a caved-in door  
in some ancient bar.

## Chapter 13

My eye has seen it  
my ear heard and grasped  
the vision

I know what you know  
nothing less  
than you

so I'd speak to God  
to the one  
whose reason is all

you are all plasterers  
you think you are doctors  
but it's only broken walls before you

you smear them over  
with a whiteness of lies  
a color you take for truth itself

you should shut up before them  
and your silence become  
a road to wisdom

stop then on your way  
here on these lips  
is a little plea

you speak for God  
and in that acting  
you can only be false

you have a case amorphous as air  
the court is only a conceit  
behind your forehead

what can you say  
when you catch him  
in a lie or contradiction

will you make him squirm  
can you make him speechless  
in his witness?

his words will unmask you  
your conceit crack and fade  
like a painted smile of piety

you will crack in the sun  
of his majesty and fall  
to pieces before him

your heavy talk in the dust  
of ashes  
with the clean little homilies

the niceties broken like clay  
lay there then in your dumbness  
so I may speak

opening to whatever  
becomes  
of me

my flesh may become  
the one last meal  
in my mouth

my breath become  
the one last drink  
in my hand

though he slay me  
yet these words stand  
to speak up

to his face  
they are my voice itself  
no false witness

could find these words  
you see I'm not cut off  
stand back        listen

to the voice of poetry  
that is making my case  
and may be lasting justice itself!

who else is there  
to argue with this song  
cut the air out of my life

then I'd rest content with silence  
death sentence  
but still two things more

I ask of you  
to allow me to open  
myself in your eyes

remove the hand that falls  
leaden on me  
like a heavy depression

except that I move            falls  
like silent terror  
except that I speak

and lighten my fear  
I want to walk out of the dark  
to meet your fierce stare

call me and I'll be there  
just as right now I'm speaking  
for you to answer here

how many crimes and untold lies  
am I unconscious of  
how can I see them

with your face hidden  
veiled in silence  
what enemy is in me

that you squeeze in a vise  
but at such distance  
infinite space

am I a leaf spun away  
in a burst of wind  
impossible to see

what power in that leaf  
blindly afloat  
to feel terror



this numb piece of paper  
you squeeze my feelings on  
held in this painful air:

bitter words  
you have written down  
against me

a list I inherit  
from the unspoken lies  
of my past

my feet are also locked  
as if you would hold me  
ready for punishment

in that vise  
some crime some slight  
some monstrous pinprick

forced you to look  
narrowly at me  
narrowing my path

noting each unique footprint  
brand of a slave  
a voice singing out through the bars.

## Chapter 14

Man swims out of a woman  
for a few days of restless living  
full of anxieties

a flower springing up  
under the passing cut  
of the share's thrust

a shadow fading out  
of time  
gone

disintegrating  
like an old wineskin  
an old coat

eaten away  
by moths  
drained

and this is the creature  
you open your eyes on  
take time to judge

as if pure earth can be extracted  
out of lust-spattered hair  
by a man himself

however young or innocent  
he dies  
in a dusty coat of experience

because our days are numbered  
so we can count them ourselves!  
approximate the whole

short story  
you give us  
with its "The End"

look the other way          turn your eyes away  
why don't you  
just let us be here

ignorant slaves  
enjoying our work  
enjoying our sleep

till we finish this simple story  
and get a little rest . . .  
even a tree cut down

has some hope  
it can spring to life  
old roots

start up tenderly  
even if its body stump  
dies in the dust

soon as it whiffs some water  
it starts  
growing like a new plant

but a man just disappears  
one last breath  
and where is he

lakes have completely evaporated  
rivers shrunk away  
and men laid down to rest

never to rise  
or materialize  
the sun can die

galaxy collapse  
space evaporate  
universe shrink to a ball

and we will not hear it  
nothing will shake us  
awake in our beds

if only you could hide me  
beyond existence  
outside of space and time

in a darkness  
a secret  
beyond the known

until your famous anger passes  
and then you remember me  
waiting for the book to close

waiting for an appointment!  
is it just possible  
a man dies and lives again?

I'd bear any day        every day  
heavy as it is  
waiting

for your call  
and I would answer  
you want to hear me again

this creature you made with care  
to speak  
to you

but now you number each step I take  
note so slight a false movement  
I can't even see it

as if my guilt is sealed  
under a coat of whitewash  
faded from my eyes but there

as a mountain  
that will finally fall  
a rock that will be moved

a rain wearing away the stone  
a storm a flood  
washing the earth away

as you wash away  
the hopes of a man  
we are lost at sea

our faces go blank  
unrecognizable  
painted out forever

sunk out of your sight  
we swam a little  
and we drowned

our families rise in the world  
we don't know them  
or they fall

or they disgrace themselves  
sink into despair  
we don't think of them

we only feel our own flesh  
rotting        only hear  
the echo of our body:

the pains of its dying,  
the mourning  
of its self.

## Chapter 16

I've heard these righteous clichés  
over and over  
thanks for the precious comfort

the heavy breathing  
in a bag of wind  
that just gets noisier

you want to drown me out  
with monotonous whispering  
platitudes?

I could do that if I were you  
like putting any word in front of the next  
while making faces at a baby

the tone is one of a sermon  
you solemnly deliver  
with just the right voice quiver

babble on  
till the baby falls asleep  
but when I really speak

my pain stays there  
and if I hold myself back  
I'm still alone with it

and him  
his famous jealousy  
wearing me down

like precious jewelry  
over my entire body like skin  
each minute becomes heavier

I'm distracted by myself  
alienating all my company  
who turn on me

like bribed witnesses—  
the friends I counted on!—  
lying into my face

friends who've disappeared  
like flesh on my body  
thinned by tension

wrinkled by despair  
slim enough to be accused  
as I'm barely standing

of paranoia or hunger  
therefore craving bread  
therefore a liar to myself

whose open face  
hides these hot words  
steaming in my mouth

but it's clear I'm consumed  
on the flame of his anger  
in the gnashing of teeth

in the eyes that flash  
sirens across my face  
the mouth that curls in a snarl

an arm reaches out a claw  
slaps my face  
my friends become a mob a beast

with the faceless energy called courage  
of a bitten animal  
raw violence

selfish masks  
ripped away from the unconscious  
faceless the way they really are



and I'm delivered  
by my God  
to this transparent world

of bitter losses vicious plots  
covered with a veneer  
of paper thin consciousness

the masks of sincerity  
dropped like hot coals  
in God's rage against me

I was content  
happy productive peace-loving  
peace-making

until he grabbed me by the neck  
spun me around  
and shattered me

worried me to pieces  
pulled me together a moment  
to stand as a target

for friends and enemies  
what's the difference  
I could be them

blindly righteous  
strangers to ourselves  
we think our eyes are friends

confidently looking out for us  
but they'd close in the instant  
they saw the volcano within

the first volcano  
and when we turn to look back at the world again  
it's almost too dim to see

slowly we adjust to the light in the room  
this is the world we're made for  
but where is the human light

of justice coming from—through the crack  
within        or from without  
but space is all the same

and on both sides I'm a target  
God's arrows spinning past me  
his men surround me

and I'm hit  
again and again  
piercing my stomach my bowels

spilling my insides out  
he clubs me down  
leader of the riot

or the purge the pogrom  
he is a policeman  
and I am wearing rags

can't change my clothes  
can't shave can't move  
my life my plans paralyzed

till my head sinks into dust  
heavy antlers  
of a battered wild ram

humiliation  
my face a red desert  
from weeping

craters of depression  
the dark eye shadow  
of death

and not a drop or speck  
of violence  
from my own hands

not a bad wish  
not a curse in the cleanness  
of my daily creations

O earth, cover not over my blood!  
don't be a tomb a museum  
for my miserable poem

my cry against this sinking  
leave my voice uncovered  
a little scar on your face

face of the earth  
open to the sky  
the universe

where you can see  
a justice waiting to be discovered  
like an inner referee

the deep seat of conscience  
where a creator sits  
handing me these words themselves

these verses are my absolving witness  
on this little home earth  
from which they speed

out into the universe forever!  
even as my tears  
fall in the dust

before an angry God who hears and sees  
my plea        words and tears  
of a man

for the life of his brother or son  
the love of another living man  
who is also me

on the outside  
and inside the listening unconscious  
creator who is also he

as clear as the clearest dream  
as the little ball of earth  
seen in a photograph

whom I call with my breath  
as if he were human  
unlike these words living beyond me

for I know I'm sentenced to die  
my little story of years  
will soon be over

I'll be going down the road  
to fall in the dust  
just one time.

## Chapter 17

My breath straining  
my days fading  
through a prism of pain

in my chest  
thinning my voice my hair  
getting me in shape

for the grave  
surrounded by a chorus  
of mockingbirds

who won't let me rest  
my eyes wide open  
on the hard bed

of their bitterness . . .  
lay down something beside me  
some collateral I can grasp

you yourself  
granted me this speaking  
no one else will back me

no one shakes this open hand  
you've closed their minds  
shrunk their hearts into a bird's breast

but you won't let them sing  
over me        in the morning  
because they're shut in their ignorant night

denying a friend  
for some self-righteous flattery  
precious blinders for their eyes

while their children's sight grows dim  
who recognize my famous name  
trademark for bad medicine

something to spit at the feet of  
my eyes are also blurred  
but by tears

my hands and feet  
fading away  
like shadows

if any man is really open  
he'll stop in his tracks  
at this trial

of standing up  
on innocent feet  
among brothers

and being covered with total abuse  
still that man will walk on  
through the heap of civilized refuse

the wasteland of clichés  
spiritual materialism  
and his legs will grow stronger

meanwhile the show goes on  
men of the world  
stone me

with the ready-made knowledge  
any idiot can buy in the supermarket  
my business totally collapsing

my days fading like an echo  
of the shattering  
of my ego        all my plans

my heartstrings  
cut silently  
in the night that switches to day

at the push of a button  
like the unconscious habit  
of false righteousness

taking the powers that be  
for granted  
and so I can't even sleep

you come to me with these rigid proverbs  
these artificial lights  
like "there's light at the end of the tunnel"

all I want to see is reality  
of darkness        to make my bed  
underground

grave you are my father!  
worm my mother  
and my sisters

so here I am in the dust  
faithfully returned to  
so this is the hope

I should bow down to?  
where are we then  
but in the fading light of the unconscious

turning dreams to lost memories  
dreams of a decent life  
who can see anyone else's        *but him*

the innocence of them  
spontaneous trust  
my spirit open to them

will they also go down with me and with  
these dream mouths of friends  
to the ancient bar of dust

the vast unconscious cellar  
to become dry bones  
all my dreams of a livable future.

## Chapter 19

How long does this gale  
of words go on  
this wind



you turn on my spirit  
choking me  
each time you've opened your mouths

is an insult friends  
a hot brand on me  
cast-iron reproductions of advice

meant for sheep  
it doesn't offend you  
to goad me like one

let's say I did something wrong  
it's none of your business  
no example for your self-righteous

spiritual merchandise  
the goods making you feel superior  
as if this rag of skin is proof

of my poverty  
open your ears your silk purses  
a minute: it's God who's

done me wrong  
this chain around my neck  
is not my words or thoughts

if I cry help  
I'm being strangled  
no one can hear

where's the judge  
to hear these groans  
from a poor man

I'm locked in my own ghetto  
the streets are dimmed  
by walls of pain

my pride stripped away  
my humble crown of faith  
in my own work and spirit

knocked down  
my body a truth horribly distorted  
I'm nothing

torn down like an old building  
gone before you know it  
a vacant lot

paved over  
not even the hope of a tree  
my smallest hope makes him angry

kindling for his rage  
I'm the enemy  
surrounded by his troops

with your ironclad masterplan  
cut off the city  
as if I were some Leningrad

but my brothers are far away  
removed        remote  
my friends totally aloof

relatives don't know me  
my closest friends  
don't remember who I am

guests in my house  
never knew me  
to neighbors I'm the worst kind of stranger

an immigrant a beggar a bum  
in the eyes of women I supported  
invisible to men who worked for me

even when I ask them humbly  
as a poor dog  
a few tender yelps

an intimate embrace a kiss  
fills my wife with horror  
just the smell of my breath

my whole family is disgusted  
backing off  
coughing in disgust

children on the street  
hold their noses       spit  
run from me

all my deepest friends turn away  
can't stand the sight of me  
all those I loved the best

my bones creak laughing at me  
my skin loose around them  
like toothless gums       leprous

my teeth disappearing  
there's hardly one left or anything solid  
holding me together

some pity friends a little pity  
dear friends  
I'm wounded            struck

by the hand of God  
a serious blow you can see  
why do you keep on hurting me

why is the pleasure of my flesh not enough  
that you need to squeeze  
the last breath from my spirit

O if only these words were written down  
printed and reproduced  
in a book

engraved carved  
with an iron pen  
into solid rock forever!

monumental inscription  
filled with volcanic lead  
hardened into my one solid witness!

but inside myself  
I know my witness breathes  
to answer me            God himself

giving birth to words  
vision itself  
my constant creator

an answering wind like out of my mouth  
to turn my case around  
in front of the world

my judge and referee  
and I'll be there  
even without my flesh

though cancer devours my skin  
I'll stand up        behind this body  
my spirit will somehow pull me up

even for a moment to see it  
in the twinkling of an eye  
through the open window

of my own eyes  
still alive  
my living heart feeling

the justice of his presence  
beside me within me  
before I die

as I almost did  
when you joined the bandwagon  
of my pain

waving at me to stop  
as if it was all my fault  
as if I started the engine

but you'll stop at a whistle friends  
that blows you down  
that blows your spiritual arrogance away

the sound of your own pain  
opening your eyes  
to a higher judgment.

## Chapter 21

Just listen to me  
you're all sealed up  
in the big consolation

of blind faith  
that you offer me so generously  
but if you'd just open a little hole

in your ears  
I'd be happy enough being alive  
speaking these words to living beings

then you can resume mocking  
anyway it's not you not men  
pushed me to voice my thinking

to have to speak my mind  
total consciousness  
to listen to my own self calling

to hear all and nothing  
the answer in the call  
more than one man can stand

so what good is patience  
look at me head-on  
and be amazed

as your hand jumps  
to cover your mouth  
gaping astonished

when I stop to think  
myself  
I'm paralyzed

my skin crawls  
pure horror  
here it is        hear it

why do totally corrupted men  
go on living  
grow old in style

grow richer every day  
see their children grow  
into their power and houses

in safety        insured  
peace to them  
and their brothers

God's arrows  
don't reach them  
no heavy justice for them

their bulls mount their cows  
no sooner said than done  
a calf without fail

they have a flock of children  
frisky little lambs  
they run out to play

and dance to the tambourine  
and sing with the lyre  
and absorb the melody of flutes

their lives close like a sunset  
prosperous and peaceful  
they head to the grave

go down softly under  
and yet  
they'd said to God

leave us alone  
we don't want to know  
of you

why do we need God  
to be servants  
and what's there to get

from meditating on it  
what's the profit  
in spending our time on him?

isn't their happiness  
in their own hands  
isn't this circle of corruption

outside God's orbit  
as you think of the unscrupulous  
do you see their lights

turned off  
their careers in ruins  
bodies struck by heavy hand



because God is mad at them?  
how often  
and do you see them turned

to rags  
yesterday's newspaper  
blowing in the wind

you say his children  
will end up paying for it?  
no—let his own nerves

strain for the price  
his own eyes  
see himself break down

a shattered mirror  
blown apart  
in a heavy wind

let him live and learn  
and drink from the cup  
that's thrown in his face

what does he know or care  
how his house stands  
like a man totally drunk

he's finished the bottle  
of his life  
died satisfied

is there something God should learn  
from us  
here

something about spiritual materialism  
the debt he owes and forgot  
to pay the corrupt and yes the self-righteous

because you yourselves  
become his judge  
when you write off the reality

of the world he made  
set in front of you  
just as it is

one man dies at a healthy age  
drinking to the full  
his milk pails were always full

marrow of his bones still sweet  
body still attractive  
to women            attracted by them

and another man dies shrunken  
in a bitter spirit  
not even a drop of happiness

and then they lie down together  
in the same bed of dust  
with worms to cover them up

and yes I know your thoughts  
the wooden arguments  
the corpses you're lining up

you want to ask your rigid questions  
but where is Stalin's house now  
or Franco's

not to mention countless  
run of the mill criminals  
never caught: Martin Bormann etc.

the loyal collaborators  
the rich and privileged saluting  
any flag that flies their way

reflected in the polished boots of chauffeurs  
Mercedes Benz  
certain popes

and busy in the wings the faceless  
you won't see them standing around  
at any apocalypse

you ought to ask some tourists  
who speak your language  
open-mindedly

listen to some impartial camera clicks  
look at the photographs  
even postage stamps

you push me into irony  
and out the other side  
to common sense

the deeply corrupt disappear  
in limousines and passports  
flown to obscure small towns

or islands  
relax or even return  
after the dust settles

and newspapers have crumbled  
no one stings him with pointed proverbs  
under his beard

no one unmask him face to face  
he lives like a god  
and dies on the shoulders

of the mass of dupes  
who carry him to his grave  
which becomes a protected museum

his mouth is fixed at peace  
by the embalmer        the priest  
throws no dirt on his reputation

he'll live in some history  
while the masses supporting him  
are barely a footnote

Hollywood extras  
following the hearse  
lining the curbs

why this empty comfort you point to  
these empty nothings you argue  
this empty room of thought

you goad and push me into  
this dark and hostile consolation  
this humorless nonsense of empty religion.

## Chapter 23

Today again  
my speech my poem  
this hard-talking blues

this heavy hand  
from the long deep writing  
of my spirit

O if I could know  
where to go  
and there

find him  
at home  
in his seat of justice

I'd sit down there  
to lay out my case  
before him

my mouth would be full  
like a river  
of what my heart must say

my mind open  
like a window  
to hear his words

as easy to understand  
as the sounds of people  
on the street

I wouldn't be blown away  
overpowered  
by them

but my own voice would be steadied  
like a tree outside  
in a bracing March wind

wind between the wood  
earthly music  
stirring my spirit

in his house  
where an upright open man  
isn't afraid to confront him

to listen to respond  
to contend        a human music  
creating the air

for a higher justice  
in which to hear  
I'm set free

but now I look to the east  
and he isn't there  
west and a vast empty ocean

face north  
like a true compass  
see nothing

turn south  
and he's still invisible  
hidden from my ear

but he follows each step I take  
even when I'm sitting doing nothing  
and he puts me in the crucible

to have his gold  
because I've walked all my life  
toward his light

past the neon temptation  
of unreal cities  
surreal commercials for "normality"

my lips have opened  
for his infinite word  
in meditation

I've opened his book  
in my heart  
and read with open eyes

he is one  
determined within himself  
as end

and has an end  
all changes all choices  
rest in his mind

but how can I change his mind  
his soul desires  
and it's already been done

ancient history  
past changing  
beyond our time

here he hands me  
part of a sentence  
already out of his mouth

and there's more to say  
just as the past fills  
with more to discover

it makes me shiver  
to think  
I must face him

here on this earth  
now in this life  
present in the infinite

transfigured  
as my inaccessible inner self  
rises to his hand

I turn white  
cold sweat of fear  
washes across my face

I want to turn back  
as if I'm walking in my sleep  
out of a world I know

my own shadow  
smiles back at me  
a shadow in the night



the past is drunk with strangeness  
and his presence  
drowns my heart in naked space

because he brought me out here  
into the darkness  
where I must continue speaking

into the open  
like a child holding tight  
to the side of his trembling crib.

## Chapter 24

The days of judgment  
and everyone has one  
are no dark secret

because God has finished his sentence  
but men are mostly blind  
and that's the way God made it

but why are his hearers  
also deaf  
to the coming of those days

while corrupted men  
totally in the dark  
cut through fences and honest agreements

and anyone in their way  
knocking down the shepherd  
stealing the sheep

they drive off  
in the repossessed cars  
of the poor

foreclose  
on widows and orphans  
lock up a workman's tools

shove the homeless  
out of their way  
terrorize old people

already cringing  
in little groups  
huddled in corners

and the masses  
are exploited asses  
donkeys up a mountain

or camels in the desert  
they report for work  
as they're told

as the sun rises until dark  
carrying the water they can't take home  
to their thirsty children

they harvest healthy food  
for corrupt masters  
pick the ripe grapes

for the cynical toasts  
of the power-hungry  
spilling the precious wine of their sweat

to finally lie down  
naked under cold stars  
not a shirt on their back

to wear in the predawn  
dew from the mountains  
making them roll over in their sleep

and hug close  
a rock  
shelter from the storm

when it rains  
while the privileged few  
snore in their yachts

on the sea of the masses  
on the sweat of their backs  
on the milk of a mother's breast

from whose arms they'd wring  
the brief soft luxury  
that's all most men ever know

rip the child  
from the widow's breast  
as security

against some calculated debt  
to keep the heads of the poor  
under water

in a sea of desperation  
naked of human rights  
a mass of mesmerized slaves

walking through the rich waves  
of grain  
bringing in the sheaves

for a perversely ornate table  
half-starved  
the workers of the world

between stones  
pressing oil for the ruling classes  
only their sweat belongs to them

treading the winepress of the bosses  
in life's oasis  
dying of thirst in the desert

listen to those distant groans  
far from the drowning hum  
of the city

a wounded army of souls  
gasping in their ancient tracks  
but God doesn't hear that prayer

and in the cities  
even among the elite  
men get away with murder

darkness meets darkness  
a blood pact  
against his light

light of day  
of reality  
of the inspiration for making

electric light  
and the continuing surprise  
of every morning sunrise

there are men  
who've lost the path  
to daylight

rising at daybreak  
to terrorize the caravans  
of the huddled masses

murderers  
and at night under their dark blanket  
thieves

adultery: another broken commandment  
under cover of darkness  
and masks

any form of disguise  
a man in woman's clothes  
slipping into the harem

thinking under his veil  
no one will see me  
no one know but she

they break up houses  
as criminals  
break into them

into the ones at night  
they marked that day  
in an ignorant scrawl of a mind

blind  
to the light  
we are given

strangers in the morning  
to their own shadow  
floating on the surface of consciousness

they are submerged  
in the nightmare unconscious  
because they can't make anything

of the light of a star  
focused like a conscience  
in the eye of imagination

creating light  
in the image of light  
honest day light

I rise from a dream in  
to discover the universe without  
that was within

rising past superstition  
idols and dumb images  
having nothing to say in daylight

yes belief requires dreams  
and every night  
we go to sleep in this world

while those others are at home  
talking and listening  
to shadows

completely intimate  
with the nightmare  
of death's shadow

show me  
this isn't true  
reduce these words to nothing

to nonsense like a magician  
and I'll show you as your new servant  
my eyes were fixed on reality.

## Chapters 26–27

Since I'm so weak  
and this poem so pitiful  
so powerless

I'm lucky again today  
to have such friends  
such care for the feeble

how nobly you've lifted  
this poor arm that writes  
what a miracle

what strong donations  
you've made to little minds  
barely subsisting on the minimum wisdom

I can hardly know what I'm saying  
except thanks to you  
your fatherly advice spilling over me

but who filled you with it  
and who are you speaking to  
what possesses you

to form such a rigid piety  
with a breath  
caught in what flow of meaning

my poem has a way  
to continue  
even as I swear by God

who holds back my living right  
to be free of bitterness  
that damn it I'm speaking

my own mind as he allows  
as these breaths come out of me  
these shreds of phrases

my spirit revives and hangs on  
to the wind God sends  
through my nostrils

and the words that leap off my lips  
fall true to the page  
of my conscience



it's out of my hands  
to let you get away  
with your self-righteous platitudes

as solid as flotsam  
but as long as I'm alive  
I won't let go

of the stone rightness  
my spiritual individuality  
until I die

the page of my heart  
opens to the wind  
of his warming breath

let my enemy be as cold  
as the heartless  
my accuser suffer

the secret death chills  
of the liar  
perspire with the guilty

cold sweat flow  
in his veins  
dripping from a heart as stiff

as an icicle        a conscience  
upright but hopeless  
as he prays

for what help  
meditates on what  
burning sphere of thought

that may give him a push  
through the world of things to accumulate  
but what is there to get

when his body loses its grasp  
on life        does God hear  
the cry of this hypocrite

will he delight in his calling  
man to God        a dialogue  
or has this man's words been smothered

behind a mask  
yes I know something about it  
God's place

inside us  
moving my hand  
that lifts and calls

to him  
it has nothing to conceal  
my mind is an open book

for God's hand  
take a look  
you must have read there

so why have you become so proud  
you blow your hot empty breath  
your stream of words on me.

## Chapter 29

Who can turn me around  
until I find myself  
back in the old days

the good days  
God watching over me  
the sun shining

inside me  
like inner light  
to usher me past the nightmares

on the screen of giddy youth  
my life was in focus  
around me        it was autumn

wife and children growing  
my walks were bathed in light  
in cream

the heaviest rocks in my way  
smoothed out  
like oil

I was as if transported  
wherever I went  
on a stream of affection

when I went out the city gates  
or when I came to my place  
in the city square

the younger men quickly stepped  
aside        like a wave disappearing  
while the older men rose to their feet

celebrities stopped  
in the middle of what they were saying  
and almost covered their mouths

the voices of politicians trailed off  
like old newspapers  
blown in the wind

their tongues dried up  
dusty leaves  
swept to the back of their mouths

I mean men listened to me  
you could hear a leaf drop  
they wanted my opinion

when I finished I was allowed  
the clarity of silence  
my words fell gently on them

like spring rain  
they were attentive as trees  
opening their arms

stretching their hands out gladly  
as if their minds were open  
to the sky

and when I laughed or  
made light of things  
they were almost stunned

to be reminded I was human  
their eyes would light up  
blossoms the sun smiled on

I directed their thoughts  
to the best way        a revelation  
they followed like actors visibly

in the presence of a master  
a man who'd paid more than his dues  
inspiring confidence in the disillusioned

their ears would open  
and mouths speak of me  
graciously

anyone seeing me  
became a witness  
to my openness

I embraced a poor man  
and an orphan  
and a man with no one in the world

to turn to  
a man dying gave me a blessing  
a widow smiled with joy for me

I opened myself  
and a cloak of pride  
slid from my shoulders

I embraced a sense of justice  
that wrapped itself around me  
like a warm coat in winter

I was eyes to the blind  
and feet  
to the lame

a father to the homeless  
a light in the midnight window  
to the stranger far from home

I was a destroyer of nightmares  
like a gentle counselor  
in an orphanage

then I said to myself  
I will die  
in the open arms of a family

and my seed in that nest  
outgrow the arithmetic of a lifetime  
the calculations of a mind

or historical lineage  
my spirit extends beyond time  
like a phoenix rising

from ashes  
an ancient poem  
from the dust of pages

my roots reaching out  
for water  
each new coming spring

and the dew shall lie all night  
on my branches  
and I feel the sweetness of that weight

on me  
that miraculous touch  
of heaven

waking my heart  
made light again  
by the fire of love within

my pen returning to the page  
like an arrow to the heart  
a love as strong as death.

## Chapter 30

But now it's all a joke  
to the younger generation  
I'm an outdated ape

too heavy to take seriously  
for the puppies of men  
who in my time I wouldn't

have insulted my dogs by going near!  
dogs whose hearts were higher  
among my flocks of sheep

men whose hearts burned out  
in a destruction of spirit  
shriveling their humanity into rags

they haunt the back alleys  
of a civilized wasteland  
like the "disgusting" gypsies

they stooped to revile  
in false images  
to make themselves feel superior

devastated Indians  
of their own manufactured  
nightmares

eating the weeds  
they claw up greedily  
like outcast witches

banished from the self-righteous society  
that rightly hounds them  
like fleeing common criminals

they huddle in unblanketed pits  
in primitive dreams: caves  
of obsolete railroad cars

wallowing in the mud  
of self-pity  
gnawing the worms of desire

their sons a gang of animals  
monsters of inhuman pride  
hands on their belts like horsewhips



and now I've become the bait of their humor  
their theme song  
their saddle their fetish

their figure of contempt  
they are primitive giants of ice  
aloof over me

I'm the floor  
they spit on  
because God has knocked me down

unstrung the bow of my back  
unleashed the curs  
of their tongues on me

these vile witnesses at my right hand  
this vigilante lynch mob  
has come down my road of ruin

there are no living heroes  
to step out of nowhere  
in their way

all my defenses broken down  
inevitably as water  
breaks through an abandoned dam

my nerves on edge  
wild deer fleeing  
from the cracks of a thunderstorm

terror faces me like a wall  
or a wind blowing my strength away  
my hope disappearing like a cloud

my soul emptied like a glass of water  
and in my hand  
are miserable tears

my very bones are sweating  
at night my veins  
restlessly throb

my clothes and skin  
bleached beyond recognition  
by the acid of my suffering

my collar shrinks tight  
around my throat  
the hand of God's wrath

which drags me down to the mud  
my spirit itself is dressed  
in dust and ashes

I speak to you  
hard and true  
over the heads of men

who look down at me  
my voice goes out of me  
a wounded bird

flying to you  
in your sky        crying  
its whole being is calling

to you and you  
don't answer  
I stand trembling before you

and you look at me  
as if I'm not there  
as if you don't know or care

what I want  
you sit in your great high chair  
and in your great satisfaction

toy with me cruelly  
your hand bears down on me  
heavy and hostile

I'm like crumpled paper  
lifted in your wind  
driven to the edge of existence

tossed in a tempest  
my significance dissolved  
in the heavy downpour

without the warmth of your care  
even the word significance  
bleeds dry

I know your arm is leading me  
to my death  
to the meeting house

where every living creature  
lies down  
before you

but did I ever lift  
my arm  
to strike or sweep away

a ruined heap of a man  
whose tortured voice reached out  
for help to me

for a shred of sympathy  
and could I not help but weep  
with him

in his hour of despair  
did my heart not stop  
for this man

for the poor and wretched  
of humanity  
didn't I close my eyes

like a hurt child to feel  
the boundless passion of inwardness  
in every man opened by suffering

but when I opened my eyes  
looking for something hopeful  
desolation

I waited for some light  
I hoped for light  
but darkness came over me

and in the pit of my stomach  
a cauldron boils  
endlessly

days flow into days  
like a miserable diarrhea  
I wake in the morning

and there's no sun  
no ray of friendship  
I stand up crying

in the squares  
in the bars  
in the cafés

and I'm looked at as a brother  
to dragons or lizards  
crocodiles are my companions

owls and screeching ostriches  
are the comrades of my  
plaintive shriek of despair

my skin hangs on me  
like a tanned wolfhide  
my bones melt with fever

my lyre is stretched  
to the pitch of wailing  
my flute

is a voice turned  
to a siren song  
in a human holocaust.

## Chapter 31

I came to a decision  
behind my eyes  
not to let them wander

over the innocent bodies  
of young girls  
I refocused their attention

what decision am I thus allowed  
to see reaching into this world  
from behind God's highest cloud

what sense of human  
natural rightness  
beyond the senses

is it really disaster  
for the cold-hearted  
hard-core manipulators

of sympathy and affection  
devastating twisters  
of all feeling in their paths

doesn't he see me  
standing openly in the aisle  
isn't that his light each step I take follows

if I walked beside high vanity  
self-made lights of deception  
and let my foot pull me dumbly

into the shadows of bitterness  
then let my heart be weighed like stone  
on an honest scale

in his hand of justice  
and he'll know the lightness  
my heart still clings to

if I let my legs  
carry me away  
in blind animal pride

or let my heart go  
to the blood-lust of the world  
before my naked eyes

or let my hands indulge themselves  
in the mud and gravel of cement  
for a wall between us

then let another mouth  
eat all  
I've worked and sweated for

and all the seeds I've planted  
in the ground in my mind in the body  
of my wife

be uprooted            totally  
if I gave my heart away  
blindly

to the cold deception  
of a heartless woman  
or the wife

left innocently alone  
in the sanctuary  
of my neighbor's home

if I consciously even dreamed  
myself there  
let my wife swallow every drop

of my lifeblood my honor  
in the seed  
of every passing man

let them worship between her thighs  
as greedily as men suddenly released  
from death sentences

then let her rise  
to become their servant  
to wash their sheets while I weep for her

while my eyes go blank with despair  
before the total explosion  
of a life

I'd be guilty of a fire  
swallowing up the air around me  
destroying the spirit of others

as it's magnified in the mirror  
of my silent rage within  
gone blind with desperation



all my hopes dreams desires  
utterly consumed  
in the passionate proof

of my lifelong ignorance  
boiling up within          temptation  
for an untouchable woman

and forgetting that I'm a man  
descended from men and women  
who held their love humbly

as the free gift  
of a baby in their arms  
deserving adoration

if I coldly turned away  
from the open heart or hand  
of my humble servant

anyone I put  
consciously or not  
in a place to serve me

and who did so          freely or not  
then where am I  
when I'm in God's presence

how will I come to ask for  
what no one can demand  
the free gift of love

no longer mine to give  
as I turned cold and heartless  
in this body he gave me

that he made for us all equally  
in the wombs of women  
he alone        shaping us there

one creator  
one hand moving  
one conscious subject

if I refused  
the needs of the poor  
given to my spirit to bear

if I refused a woman        homeless  
having lost her husband  
and turned to me

a man in her eyes  
growing dim with tears  
someone other to look on

for help in the overpowering  
needs one life faces  
alone for the sake of others

if I swallowed my morsel of food  
alone in the face of even one orphan  
who had none

if I didn't raise that boy  
as his father        that girl  
as her true compass

if I've seen someone naked  
hopelessly exposed  
having lost the shirt off his back

or a poor man woman or saint  
who barely ever had one  
if that body was not a blessing

I was given to warmly embrace  
with fleece from my flocks  
if I lorded it

over anyone  
because I had the cold advantage  
of friends in high places

then let my arm be wrenched  
out from its socket  
my writing hand fall limp

the pen slip from my fingers  
words dry up on my lips  
because the turning of God

away from us            as we may turn away  
is utter devastation  
the dark side of the moon

I couldn't stand there  
or breathe  
unless he gave me some wisdom

to learn to shield myself  
learning by facing terror  
that love protects us

if I put my faith in gold  
filled my sack of pride  
with money

and talked to myself  
as if I were precious metal  
saying I hold my own security

if I stood up straight  
held my head high  
encased in rigid armor

the tin shield of fortune  
I thought was self-made  
forged with my own hand

if I stared into the sun           inwardly  
mesmerized or blindly enlightened  
struck by its shining riches

if I ever stood hypnotized  
before the dreamlike beckoning  
of the full moon rising           silver and gold

letting my heart be captured  
by cults of sensuality  
becoming a slave

to my own enlightenment  
handed over to the power  
of some physical light or master

some magical dazzling myth  
obscuring the light of history on  
the pages of human struggling

from generation to generation  
to be free of idols and false images  
and the hand holding the ax

at whose edge we tremble  
dazzled by the glinting beauty  
of secret fear or evil

as it slices through our thought  
until we can't hold together  
can't contain the reality

of opposing forces of energy  
the physical struggle inside  
of good and evil

if I fell  
before idols  
separating thought from feeling

if I kissed my own hand  
to blow kisses  
to some material body in the sky

then that is the height of superstition  
the queen of lies  
in the face of God

like incest  
denying my nature  
cutting off my human hand

if I secretly exulted  
to learn my enemy  
was cut down

struck down by his mean thought  
like lightning  
where he was hiding

if I let bitterness  
slither through my lips  
to poison his character

then let the men closest to me  
pin me down  
devour my flesh with passion

twisting my desire  
to share with anyone hungry  
my portion of meat

if I left a passing stranger  
to sleep in the street  
naked to darkness

and didn't open my door  
to the open road  
sharing my light and warmth

if I have hidden my sins  
in a hole  
in my heart

like the common herd  
covering up the truth  
with dirt and litter

because I was afraid to stand out  
from the herd        afraid  
of common gossip

and contemptuous eyes  
of the self-righteous        boring in  
with the cold severity of rock-drills

if I stood terrified at that thought  
mute  
crippled in the heart

afraid to open it or my mouth  
to face my own weakness  
the petty lies to myself

that I could not even walk  
out my door  
with my head on frontwards

then I would not deserve the paper  
I'm writing on  
but here it is!

this is my voice  
reaching out for the ear  
open to hear it

where is the hearing        the time and place  
to make my suffering real  
an indictment a list of crimes

even if it were longer than a book  
I'd carry it on my shoulders  
with honor

I'd wrap it around me like a royal robe  
bind it around my head  
like a royal turban

I'd walk up to my judge  
and lay out my heart like a map  
before him

this incredible gift of a heart  
feeling  
my true thoughts

holding the history book of my life  
open to his light  
light is my defense!

as confident as a prince  
I'd put my life on the line  
in the words that are given me

in this court invisible to me  
transparent as clean air  
before the judge I live to hear

and if my land cried out against me  
indicting me with the tears  
that ran down in furrows

man made  
on the face  
of the earth

if I plucked the riches  
its fruit        filling my mouth  
and gave back nothing

not even a thought  
expanding  
in gratitude

if I have planted  
any cause for anger  
in the minds of its tillers



if one migrant worker cried out  
because I forced the breath  
of integrity out of him

then instead of wheat  
let my hand reap  
thorns

let it force to no end  
this thistle  
of a pen

let weeds grow  
and cover this page  
instead of words that grow wheat

and here for now is ended  
the poem  
Job speaks.



## On Translating Job

**J**ob is one of the greatest poems we have because it combines the highest passion with a constant refusal to leave the realm of experience. Job is any man because he speaks, even at the limit of human endurance, from his own personal circumstances in a speaking voice. And I face my own suppressed response to the completely other, to a confrontation of God and man, through the Joban poet's eyes. This happens in the illumination of the metaphorical power of speech. Light comes from dramatic tension the poem builds between a metaphorical creation and the creator's awareness of a higher Creator and a deeper order.

Job's confidence in his creator's existence is equaled by his confidence in himself. He discovers in the penetrating vision of his own words the same revelation that Israel had earlier beheld: in the beginning was the Word—a *human* vision of creation, resisting the mythological fantasy-images of the unconscious mind. He knows that his words have power, that he himself is an audience for them as he hears how the spirit behind them rises above his physical circumstances. The voice of the prophetic poet extends beyond the normal bounds of tasteful poetry precisely because the voice, inspiration itself, becomes larger than his own. Words themselves convey the revelation. We hear the universality of totally selfless speech.

With Walt Whitman as a helpful guide, I found my way back to the ancient Hebrew poets of the Bible. Like the Joban poet, Whitman is a conscious step past the *literal* prophets of Ancient Israel—a poet *first*. "As he sees the farthest he has the most faith,/his thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things"—that is Whitman, in "By Blue Ontario's Shore," on the necessity of spirit in the poet. In that poem as in others,

Whitman renews the Old Testament Prophets' faith in the individual. Self-examination in poetry has increased since Whitman's "Song of Myself" and corresponds to a re-discovery of ancient roots. The historical source of poetry, of the poet's visionary role, is paralleled in the process of self-discovery. Job, in his anguished individuality, alienated from his friends, cut off from everyone in the world, comes to realize that his creator is the only one he *could* be talking to—a self-discovery. So there's never a question of Job's sanity, even for the modern reader who may be alienated from a spiritual perspective of self.

The central emotion of the *Book of Job* is in the idea that man is not the center of the universe, and so he's not in a position to fully understand or judge its creator. I found my key to the poem neither in extensive textual research (though I consulted more than twenty different English translations of *Job* and a large amount of the critical literature: literary, religious, and philological) nor in my technical capacities as a poet, but in a kind of self-discovery which showed me a spiritual kinship between the expansive quality of experimental American poetry and a similar passion in the ancient Hebrew poets.

A poet like Whitman has more affinities with the Old Testament prophets than with the tradition of poetry in England. He embodies the American affection for the pragmatic while emphasizing that it is space and process which are unremittingly our condition. His feeling for individuality is predicated on an "America" as much as the prophet's concern for individuals extends a loyalty to Israel into metaphorical "Israel." In their acutely discerned orientation to God, the biblical poets resisted the esoteric and spoke to the mainstream (regardless of what it wanted to hear). There is likewise in Whitman an often radical boldness, out of his immersion in an everyday culture.

Both the Joban poet and Whitman are "gentle prophets": their revelations come from the natural world and the speaking openness to feeling that their poetry allows. American poetry since Whitman—especially experimental poetry—has no single source for its language in the sense that it does not

depend upon a poetic or literary vocabulary. Just as poets today may go beyond the classics to explore the roots of poetry itself, the Joban poet had a comparable freedom (within a disciplined ear for tradition) to incorporate spoken, liturgical, and literary language into his poem. Behind the original composer of *Job* lay not only a tradition of Wisdom literature, with its poetic practice of virtual quotation, but a popular oral tradition against which some of Job's lines no doubt echo. The *Book of Job* was written as poetry, not colloquial Hebrew, but with his ear tuned to the idiom, imagery, and phrasing of spoken language, and with a refined eye for new contexts of traditional imagery, the author created an atmosphere of spokenness. There is an inspiration from the physically *heard* reality of words, free of rhetorical gesture, in this poetry. Conversely, the practice of poetry leads back to a respect for the physical or natural world of experience.

Almost all English translations which strive for fluency lose imagery. But American poetry today has evolved a prosody from raw speech that is capable of equalling the complexity of the original Hebrew. The uncanny shifts and changes in the flow of ordinary conversation, the often surreal collage of overheard imagery, require the heightened sense of timing equal to the ear of the jazz musician-poet who composes as he performs. In an interview, just before his death, the legendary John Coltrane says, "You got to keep talking/to be real." In my own poetry I've concentrated on speech rhythms, on replaying in slow-motion the already established visionary experiment linking line and stanza to a sense of real breathing. In American poetry it's a democratic experimentation, an openness often surprising in how much it can include; its individualism is an egalitarian idiom. When I began to translate Hebrew psalms a few years ago, I was extending my practice to that mainstream which flowed to and from Whitman.

I see my role as translator to be individual, but in concept of approach rather than in display of "originality." My identity is in the approach, in the human desire to touch the original without tainting it. Ezra Pound, and particularly the poetic practice of his contemporary, Louis Zukofsky, showed

me how translation could be the essence of poetry, not secondary to a poet's so-called original work—an attitude shared by the Joban poet himself in his transmission of the Job legend. Zukofsky's use of translation, whether from Latin or Hebrew, bears his originality all in *how* he presents it. "Only the eyes are individual" is his statement about the unlimited wealth of imagery in front of every person: the more carefully we're able to distinguish between images of the objective world, the more we realize that it's how we look at things that makes us unique. The uniqueness of my personality is a vehicle only, from which I step out, as from a car stopped in the desert, to walk up to the meditating poet. And so the measure of my success will be how strongly the reader of my translation is motivated to read another, if not the Hebrew text itself, because I have barely begun to realize the authenticity of its greatness; yet my approach is one of committed reverence for the original poetry.

In modern poetry the spoken voice, free of aesthetic personae, may be an agent of literal spirit, suggesting a metaphorical dialogue, a higher consciousness disembodied from the poet as he listens to *himself* speaking. In that modern tradition I came to the poem of *Job* with a sense of the veracity possible in an identification with the original author, whose passionate calling on an invisible God bursts through his Job. I struggle for a depth of literalness in my translation: for instance, just as the Joban poet drew on popular proverbial expressions for irony, I have consciously used the occasional cliché and idiom of popular culture—our "airwaves" are just as filled with contending superstition and folklore (disguised as commercials or propaganda) as were the newsmongers of the ancient Middle East. It was hardly uncommon for Hebrew poets to make ironic use of "officialese."

The poets I've learned from, like the Joban poet, are often difficult activists for new openings to conscience, consciousness raised to a self-aware response to creation. The modern tradition of experimentation with collage has freed the poet from the need to dominate his poem, to be at the center of its universe. The use of collage in poetry (such as in Apollinaire)

suggests a search for visionary aesthetics in its expansion of our sense of metaphor: an infinite randomness of juxtaposition. Many contemporary biblical scholars imply a connection between biblical poetry and collage when they show that the term parallelism applies not only technically but philosophically, unfolding a visionary attitude to creativity. Like parallelism in the hands of an anonymous Hebrew poet, collage tends to disembody an authoritarian personality by its reorderings—it holds a mirror to the physical universe. In addition, American poets who explored beyond modernism, expanding it to documentary approaches (Charles Reznikoff is an example), to open-eyed meditation on language (Gertrude Stein is an example), and to self-abandoned but everyday speech (Frank O'Hara is an example), helped me feel more at home in the ancestral company of the Bible's poets.

With a historical perspective stretching back through Apollinaire's essay "The New Spirit" at the turn of the century, the tradition of experimental poetry bears in on the medium of language itself. This consciousness of linguistic context I find anchored in the poetry of the Bible, in the medium of conscience as it becomes actualized in the dialogue of man and God. The medium of biblical poetry is early Hebrew language, which is highly visual: the present tense, like the realism of a third dimension, expands out of just two tenses.

Because I wanted to recreate the intensity and visual dynamics of the original composition of *Job*, a line-by-line comparison with the Hebrew is difficult, but I do follow the original order rigorously. I wanted to be true to the flowing poetry, not just the words, of Job's speeches. Robert Gordis, in "Writing a Commentary on Job," speaks of the flow: "The two basic characteristics of biblical poetry are parallelism and, to a lesser extent, the meter patterns, which are based not on syllables, either qualitative or quantitative, but on stressed word or thought-units." And in surprisingly similar terms, here is the contemporary poet Robert Creeley characterizing Walt Whitman's poetics: "The constantly recurring structures in Whitman's writing, the insistently parallel

sounds and rhythms, recall the patterns of waves as I see them daily. How can I point to *this* wave, or *that* one, and announce that it is *the* one?" Rather than try to reconstruct the awesome museum of a literal line-by-line translation, I wanted to make the poem flow and renew itself. The *Book of Job* is not a narrative poem, but what modern poets would call a "serial" poem. Instead of a narrative climax, there's a climactic intensity that builds up in the movement of expanding repetition, deepening intensity of feeling, and the drama of Job's sheer persistence.

Here is an example of a passage with the problem of dynamic imagery diluted by weird English correspondences. Stanzas 3 through 6 of Chapter 29 read, in the King James Version:

When his candle shined upon my head, and when by  
his light I walked through darkness;

As I was in the days of my youth, when the secret  
of God was upon my tabernacle;

When the Almighty was yet with me, when my  
children were about me;

When I washed my steps with butter, and the rock  
poured me out riches of oil;

It does not seem hard to sense through this translation that the original imagery is too profound to be either washed over or congealed into impenetrable English. I've translated it this way:

. . . . .  
God watching over me  
the sun shining

inside me  
like inner light  
ushering me past the nightmare



on the screen of giddy youth  
my life was in focus  
around me        it was autumn

my wife and children growing  
my walks were bathed in light  
in cream

the heaviest rocks in my way  
smoothed out  
like oil

I was as if transported  
wherever I went  
on a stream of affection. . .

To accept *Job* on its own terms means seeing beyond the conscious narrative or drama of its "plot" to realize its author's transcendence over his self-centered mind. The imagination behind Job's words takes us away from his (and our) nightmare into the daylight of dialogue, where we can humanize the visionary totality—conscious and unconscious—of what we can't control. Where Job fails, in his inability to transcend vanity, the Joban poet succeeds: his poem is still open to an answer, beyond *his* words, in our own struggle with language and the boundaries of self.

David Rosenberg

November, 1975  
New York, New York



DAVID  
ROSENBERG

# LIGHT- WORKS

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# LIGHTWORKS

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BLUES OF THE SKY

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# LIGHTWORKS

*Interpreted from the  
Original Hebrew Book of Isaiah*

DAVID ROSENBERG

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A POET'S BIBLE

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## The Core of Isaiah

Like an astronomer interpreting the Martian landscape through camera closeups, I tried to look at the original Book of Isaiah while keeping in mind its otherness. Not only does it survive without the help of modern poets, it is undiminished by history, as if a light lit by some other than human source. As much as its subject is political and cultural, its imaginative spirit is infinitely deeper than a contemporary historian's—not only critical, but devoutly self-critical. It is motivated by naked self-awareness, a visionary perspective of history that still outdistances our present attempts at critical detachment. It expands to embrace the *otherness* of time, allowing a sense of living history in which the present is the past, and enabling the prophet Isaiah to sympathize with the broadest spectrum of humanity. In his emphasis on identifying with the lowest, the poorest, the most powerless individual, the poet and prophet become one in recognizing the freedom that openness allows.

“Freedom presupposes openness of heart, of mind, of eye and ear,” writes A. J. Heschel in *The Prophets*, a luminous study. “According to Hegel, the history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom. With some qualification one might say in the spirit of the prophets that the history of the world with which they dealt was none other than the progress of the condition of hardness of heart. The prophets continually reproach Israel for lack of sensibility.”

From the beginnings of prophecy in Israel, poetry was the central medium. It has only been during the course of modern

biblical scholarship that the original poetic origin of major portions of the Bible was discovered—and is still being unfolded. The depth of poetry in the Book of Isaiah encourages many people to turn to prose interpretations and paraphrase for illumination. But when the paraphrase serves in place of the original, something has gone wrong. Take away the sound, metaphors, and images of Isaiah and we are left merely with a mummified corpse of its meaning. And then there are the interpreters, with ears deaf to poetry, who take the prophetic metaphors too literally. For instance, parts of Isaiah have been characterized as primitive for their "elaborate ferocity." Yet, as the critic C. C. Torrey wrote in *The Second Isaiah*, "The prophet was not bloodthirsty, he was only a poet."

Unlike modern interpreters, the man devoted to the Bible in ancient times was skilled in the art of poetry. Over centuries, from the time of the original prophet Isaiah in the eighth century B.C. (whose work, preserved within the first thirty-three chapters, draws upon an even older poetic legacy) to perhaps five hundred years later, many poets lent their eyes and ears to the book we now have. They were part of what might be called the "School of Isaiah" and their primary function, like creative curators, was to preserve the authentic poetry, making sure it wasn't diluted by transmission. Occasionally during these centuries a new poet came out of the School of Isaiah whose vision and accomplishment was so powerful, both in its own right and as an expansion of the original Isaiah, that his work became accepted as further chapters to the Book of Isaiah. And so modern scholarship has come to accept "three Isaiahs" of different periods in history as the original authors. In addition, hands of other poets are felt in short passages throughout the book. Yet the work of all these poets had to pass the inspection of many additional generations of biblical scholar-poets and editors, who scrutinized them for the slightest trace of inauthentic vision. They were not looking for just the meaning or gist of Isaiah, but for its authentic expression in poetry.

The modern scholar Martin Buber, in an autobiographical

essay, noted the unique value of learning biblical Hebrew while still a child in Germany. The Hebrew tradition of inspired interpretation brought him face to face with both the authentic expression of the original text as well as the false veneer of translation. Unless moved by the same vision (as were at least three "Isaiahs"), the translator is out of touch with the original, and so it is absolutely necessary he become an interpreter and a poet. As D. N. Freedman puts it in a recent essay on prophecy in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, "The prophets were the inheritors of the great poetic tradition of Isaiah's adventure in faith and maintained, enhanced, renewed, and recreated it in the face of increasingly bitter opposition of those who preferred their religion in more manageable prose forms and who conceded (grudgingly) only the realms of liturgy (hymnody) and wisdom (gnomic and speculative verse) to the poets." As a result, the Hebrew Bible today preserves the original dynamic power of poetry in a living tradition and a still living language.

The scope of the complete Book of Isaiah is beyond any one poet, as modern scholarship confirms, and as I felt this I was drawn to the core of vision holding the whole book together. I interpret and translate what I can reach of the core of Isaiah, to demonstrate the range and flow of the whole book. I tried to sense the basic visionary unity in the act of translating itself, following up on some passages while putting others aside. The autobiographical fragment beginning Chapter 6 is not written by the same poet who set down the autobiographical section, also in the name of Isaiah, beginning Chapter 40, although both poets in this case are faithful to the core of the original Isaiah's vision.

The chapters of the Book of Isaiah do not present a narrative progression but a serial building up of passion and vision—an intuitive architecture of feeling. I have attempted a kind of model of this building, working from the biblical Hebrew I first learned in childhood. I've tried to weld together the parts I've been able to translate into a coherent unit, a prophetic poem. What is fundamentally prophetic in Isaiah is the feeling for consciousness, freeing religion from its en-

tanglements with mythology. A heightened awareness of human interdependence remains, and expands to a vision of redeeming *conscience*. But the passion for self-awareness is basic, as Yehezkel Kaufman explains in *The Religion of Israel*, "For Isaiah perceived that there can be no redemption for man unless he conquers idolatry as Isaiah understood it—his self-deification, the worship of his creations, his lust for power, avarice, class domination, the cult of the State."

To confront Isaiah I arrived at an understanding of the relationship between poet and prophet on two levels, first through the poetry, and then through the subject of its vision. I felt the hands of many poets who had worked as editors on the Book of Isaiah, shaping and assembling, sifting out extraneous accretions, preserving the authentic. My job was to tune the lines of biblical prophecy in English by restoring a sense of their original spokenness and withering irony. The rhetorical grandeur most people associate with the King James prose had to be replaced with the intimacy of the natural voice, a resonance that modern poetics allows—just as the poet today may hold an informal conversation with tradition, rather than perform a ritual exercise. I was lending my art to the text in a way that synchronized with the prophet Isaiah who had lent his voice in *his* way. Originally, the ancient poets (including the first Isaiah himself) refined the raw voice of prophecy into written poetry without diluting its spoken power. It was in that creative tradition that I came to Isaiah as a poet.

The biblical prophet's message, even as it becomes a deep metaphor for a small nation, is in the necessity to be true to his experience, to be a light to others. Not a light thrown on a particular billboard or prescription for the ills of the world, but the essence of light itself, an example of the visionary power hidden in every man and woman, beginning with the most oppressed. In the hands of a poet, this visionary message is also a metaphor for the spirit each of us suppresses within, so that the Book of Isaiah becomes a vehicle to the limits of a democratic imagination. Further, it is a testament to consciousness, revealing language itself as a medium between man and creator. There's a need to listen to the other in ourselves as



well as in others. As Heschel writes in *The Prophets* about the listening a prophet must do, "His response to what is disclosed to him turns revelation into dialogue." As Isaiah speaks out, the others become all men and women.

DAVID ROSENBERG

*January, 1977*  
*New York, New York*



# LIGHTWORKS



# Chapter 1

Listen universe  
and ear of earth        turn  
to words of your creator

they are witnesses        tuned  
to the source of memory  
invisible to all that changes:

I brought up children  
held them in my presence  
and they turn from me

deaf and blind  
when even the dumb ox knows  
who holds his food

an ass  
the trough  
its master fills

but Israel knows nothing  
of its root in me  
sees nothing of where

they come from  
who brought them up  
nobody knew them helpless and wide-eyed

and they can't stop to remember  
to think or to hear themselves thinking  
lost in themselves

mindless people  
so heavy with repressed guilt  
they think they walk lightly when they crawl

fathers in masks of self-pity  
sons in poses of self-righteous  
pettiness

their backs to creation  
they pushed it out of mind  
and turned

condemned it as blindly as a slum  
they grew up in  
they see their true home as a slum

and they refuse to see it  
looking through mirror glasses  
walking through a false landscape

of their own making        through the rubble  
of their distorted image of themselves  
grossly attenuated

running away as they run out of time  
from the father of their spirit  
from the saving dimension of depth

and history reaching back        memory  
unfolding space and time  
beyond them        beyond change

what part of this people's body  
isn't bruised yet  
from turning away

still lusting for internal bruises  
in the claws of a soulless world  
a head naked to despair

a heart exposed to desperation  
from bottoms of the feet  
to head crown

not a spot on your body  
untouched  
by the painted hand of vengeance

the revenge of men  
painting themselves  
with raw animal pride

raw canvas bejewelled  
with open wounds and blisters  
open to infection

no clean hand to unroll the bandage  
no tender selfless arms  
to cleanse your spirit

a country totally desolate  
cities of ash heaps  
fields of mud

trampled by strangers  
hordes of them streaming by  
leaving you a bystander

in your own land  
on desolation row  
the daughter of Zion

dear Jerusalem left standing alone  
scarecrow  
a shed in a cucumber field

a shack in the sea of a vineyard  
a ghetto a slum holding on  
as if by its teeth

a remnant of survivors  
and if the Lord of creation turned his back on us  
we'd only be a painful memory        no memory!

a tombstone overturned face down  
Sodom and Gomorrah  
the dark side of the moon

listen to the words  
of your creator  
blind leaders of Sodom

tune your ears  
to the witness of the universe  
deaf people of Gomorrah

look up from the self-indulgence  
of guilt-edged prayers  
the sentimental eyewash

of the time you "sacrifice"  
the money of your ritual donations  
to make yourself feel better



this is your witness speaking  
I've seen enough  
of your distracted meditation and mysteries

measured in time and money  
heard enough of your sheepish sighs  
for a pastoral future

swallowed enough of your toasts  
to institutions of repression  
smelled enough of your smokestacks

felt enough bodies fall  
to their knees  
in bloodless words

of posed "uplift"  
before monumental paperweights  
pious backdrops for photographs

who asked you for pictures  
of righteousness  
when you come to look for me

trampling through my sanctuary  
my library of unwritten  
prayer from the heart

with your precious albums  
your unreal books  
your desperate fantasy of prayer

I want no more sacred mirrors  
of yourselves  
the microphones of your empty voices

praying for an answer  
a travesty of sympathy  
like a tape-recorded answer would be

you are so locked in yourselves  
your coming out to worship  
to readings of my books

becomes the ghost of true spirit  
superstitions  
of new moons and sabbaths

I can't stand your weird impersonations  
of spiritual beings  
your minutes of meditation

and Sundays off  
I hate that cheap  
indulgence of spirit

heavier than lead  
I can't bear it  
it crushes spirit

I hide from you in light  
when you close your eyes  
to look for me

when you bow your heads  
your prayers will fall  
to the floor

your ears are filled with blood  
of your own hearts pounding  
I won't listen to that desperation

your hands are full of blood  
you turn to me  
with the blood memory of your slaughtered conscience

wash yourselves  
clean your desperate wish  
to be loved        clinging

like cheap perfume to your soul  
remove your cloaks of status  
your veils of sincerity

beneath them you grope for me  
like blind animals  
laying hands on your brothers and sisters

climbing over them desperately  
to appear self-satisfied  
before the mirror

before the community of lies  
but there in the bed of your hands  
your evil lies

there are no roofs over you  
in my sight  
let me not see it

stop the oppression  
learn to see it  
respond openly

ask questions  
love can answer  
what are those beggars on your streets

those window shoppers  
those like you depressed  
too desperate to even know it

look at them and give  
your attention  
place your hope in their hands

for they are fatherless and motherless  
widows and widowers  
totally alone

make them your cause  
reach for them  
cause them to see you are human

let us come together again  
openly  
says your creator

though the hands of your desire  
are scarlet  
they will be clean as sunshine

falling effortlessly  
over the city  
light as snow light as fleece of lamb

if you are listening  
the world will be open  
to you

if you hide your heart  
you will be slaughtered like cattle  
by the hands of desperation

the mouth  
of my creator  
has spoken

How the beautiful daughter my city  
clean light falling around her  
has become a whore

she opened the door for love  
and light came into her  
and shown in her eyes

now you murderers stand naked  
in her windows  
your house smeared with gaudy paint

of status and power  
cheap facades  
all sense of proportion lost

in the violent rush for metal  
the clasping of silver  
to your breasts

the vintage of your heart  
love pressed deep in your blood  
has become cheap wine

the cream of your people  
has mixed with the blood of thieves  
in the dark

your leaders are like terrorists  
of spirit  
spilling your lifeblood

every one loves to steal  
and turn the pages of my books  
into worthless money

they hide their loneliness away  
in dark asylums  
and turn away from orphans

turn away from the naked heart  
open to me        exposed by loss  
my widows and orphans

leaders lost in the cheap reflection  
their metal armor casts  
armor they dress their image in

to be princes for whores  
lose themselves in silence  
in beds of cheap cliches

and so my creator speaks  
to those who've repressed him  
who oppress each other

Oh I'm tired of defenses  
I'm going to lean on  
the world's tinsel fences

and crush them  
the burden of guilt will fall  
on you

with the weight of silence  
I will open your hands  
as if to cover your eyes from light

and the paper in your fists  
will fall  
the armor thin as paper

money and contracts: symbols  
of the memory loss  
that is repressed

instead I'll forgive  
with the pure fire of feeling  
remembered

you'll share the weight  
of each other with care  
the burden of vision

will take form again  
in words  
as in the beginning

of our speaking our book  
our text of light  
it will be *remembered*

with care  
in order  
to forgive

to forget to need  
to create again  
a nation

you will come home  
to see yourselves as you are  
children of light

to say it in what you do  
city of light city of song  
city of arms that are strong

that are men and women open inside  
embracing  
my daughter Jerusalem

Zion will be called  
an open ear will be its calling  
a light in the window

of the home you can  
go back to  
the memory whole again

in those that are moving  
moved to return  
lifted on wings of care

exposed to light  
committed to the page  
connecting past and future

infinite page of the sky  
recording this journey  
present journey

from and to  
desire  
all your children

turning the pages  
for others  
disarming the blind demands



of domineering pride  
the brutal suppression of daylight  
for the darkness of a self-centered womb

denying the wonder of the journey  
those dictators of hot air  
those mindless followers

they are lost together  
their memory wiped clean  
they will keep nothing

of the precious stones they cling to and defend  
they will return to the earth  
pried loose from their pebbles

as they left their children straying  
from the rock of our desire  
the light of our creation

to them it's a violent explosion  
they repress  
secure in the general darkness

for them a violent uprooting  
who put their faith in nature  
and their own imitations

industrial idols          cheap paradises  
blind to the light  
that nourishes all

it will strip them bare  
to face their wounded pride  
openly

in terror  
at the violence of the energy  
that was repressed

for a taste of seedless fruit  
a sexual knowledge  
sucking light's power in

a garden of one's own making  
a dream of being seduced  
by pride

a dream that will fade  
like leaves on dying trees  
in a desert oasis

your life will dry up  
of unquenchable thirst  
for it is really a mirage

no water will bring that dream  
to life  
you are lost in that desert

the power in your hands  
holds a paper doll  
for the fire in your mind

your world is a map of paper  
you wrap yourself in  
and burn

both you and your dream world  
burning up together  
no one to quench the fire.

## Chapter 2

These are the words  
Isaiah found  
before his eyes.

One day  
far away from now  
distant as the days of creation

the mountain of spirit  
in which Israel found  
the House of God

that mountain will be revealed  
higher  
than any earthly mountain

and all nations of the earth  
will see it clearly  
their hearts go out to it

flowing streams  
cleared of fallen wood  
moved to come closer

“Let’s go up  
this mountain of vision  
to the House of Israel’s God

to learn his ways  
to walk  
in his ways

to carry his words  
books of the Bible  
out of Jerusalem''

the words Israel found  
before them  
in Zion

then the spirit behind them  
God  
will come forward

to settle the conflicts between us  
finally        the one  
true witness

even the finality of holocaust  
will melt away  
like lowland snow

the military hardware  
translated into monkey bars  
where children play

the hardened postures  
crumbled  
like ancient statues

children will wave through the gunholes  
of tanks  
rumbling off to the junkyard

people will find hands  
in theirs  
instead of guns

learn to walk  
into their gardens  
instead of battle

Oh House of Israel  
let's walk in the sunlit ways  
of his presence

for you've been abandoned  
the House of Israel  
full of fortune tellers

provincial cult merchants  
village idiots from the East  
buying and selling the air we breathe

imitating the Philistines  
the latest style of infantile  
chant and handshake

and their warehouse filled with silver  
and gold stuffs  
beyond counting

their land full of horses  
and bloated chariots  
embroidered like doormen uniforms

totally superfluous  
going nowhere  
overly driven

their cities and roadstops thriving  
crammed with idols  
like supermarket shelves

in a daydream  
where the ego glides freely  
down the aisles

civilized slaves  
to the ghost towns  
they've bought in their heads

and they will lose it all  
their bodies fall  
dead in their tracks

in an incredible parody  
of humility  
bowing down to the idols

of their own toes  
as they emptied their spirit  
into objects of their fingers

praying to the ghosts  
of themselves  
and so they're abandoned

so you will hide  
deep in stone  
dark caves

you will pull a blanket  
of dust  
over your head

in a cold sweat  
from a vision of your Lord  
light

light you will never close  
your eyes to  
a Hiroshima for the blind

to what always was true  
light behind us  
creation before us

the false eyes of pride will look in  
to find the humble man  
behind him

the arrogant mind  
kneels  
to its earth

the highest imagination  
will be shimmering sand  
on that day

when only the Lord  
like a blue sky  
will be above us

that will be the day  
a day  
over the heads of all

that stands  
and by its little height above the earth  
is proud

feels endowed with highness  
and tall words for what stands  
merely upright        in its image

human or inhuman  
or the giant Cedars  
of Lebanon

all the upright oaks  
of Bashan  
all the straight-backed mountains

and high rising hills  
the skyscrapers  
and sheer walls

the Super Powers  
and their walls of missiles  
stockpiled

the huge launching towers  
of the Saturns  
the incredibly tall masts

of the ancient ships of Tarshish  
sailing to the edge of the world  
all the beautiful craft

all the inflated art  
the high-priced picture frames  
and gilt-edged imitations

all the high-sounding ideas  
and high-minded poses  
will fade to nothing



on that clear day  
will melt away  
like dew on the ground

men and women  
in the statues and masks  
of their pride

will topple over  
like carved chess pieces  
in a gust of wind

the little board  
on which they lived for power  
swept away with sand

when only the Lord  
like a blue sky  
will be above us

and the idols of dark thoughts  
like dreams  
passed away          utterly

and men will go deep  
into caves and to the depths  
of darkness          holes

holes in the ground  
to hide from the terrible truth  
of the Lord          light

deep beauty and power  
shaking the earth to its core  
with the simple fact of light

men will toss away fortunes  
like flaming embers  
in their laps            on that day

their mind-forged status  
the gold-lettered names they worship  
as if their hands alone conceived them

the idols of themselves            self-inspired  
the brilliant paint  
on their gods and monuments

will fade in the light of that day  
all the coveted possessions  
become molten in their hands

and they will fling them away  
to moles and bats  
in a fit of inspiration

and creep into cracks  
and crawl  
into dark corners

in fits of desperation  
clinging to stones  
to petrified wood

to a cold bed to hide under  
from the terrible truth  
of the Lord

clear beauty and power  
shaking the earth to its core  
with the simple fact of light

beyond the grasp of a man  
who reaches for power  
and cannot hold

the breath in his nostrils  
who cannot grasp it  
whose sum total is less

than that little wind  
blowing through him  
and the naked sail of his heart.

## Chapter 6

**I**t was the year King Uzziah  
died and the year  
I saw the Lord

as if sitting in a chair  
the true throne  
as it was very high

so high  
the train  
of his robe flowed down

to fill the Temple  
where I was standing  
the sanctuary

seraphic beings        burning  
shone around him  
six wings

each had six wings  
two covering the face  
enfolding it

two covering the torso  
and enfolding the sex  
of its body

and two unfolded  
in space  
flying

and each was calling  
to each other  
and the words were saying

a chorale        a fugue  
an endlessly unfolding  
hymn

Holy        Holy        Holy  
is the Lord        beyond  
all that is

and filling the world  
with the substance of light  
unfolding creation

the doors the windows the foundation  
were shaken  
moved by each voice calling

singing out  
and the House was filling  
with white smoke

clouds  
and I heard myself  
I was saying

Oh my God!  
this is the end of me  
my lips are a man's

unholy  
I live among men and women  
who give their lips falsely

give their lips to darkness  
and now my eyes are given  
blinding truth

inner and outer        the one  
king: Lord beyond all—  
and I'm uncovered        primitive

in horror of my darkness  
in terror of inhuman space  
exposed to a private death

totally vulnerable on the surface  
of earth's  
material matter . . .

then one of the seraphim  
flew toward me  
a live coal in his hand

a fire from the interior  
of the earth  
the core of my being

it was a burning stone  
from the fire  
on the altar

with the priest's tongs  
he reached in the holy altar  
and took it

and touched my lips  
with it  
and he was saying

you are seeing  
the purifying fire of creation  
burn up your past

and abstract fear and guilt  
of light        of losing yourself  
your small and only light

now abstraction turns concrete  
on your lips  
to feel the universe

the private guilt gone  
purged        lanced  
like a boil

erupted around your body . . .  
and I was clean  
and whole

and I heard the voice  
of my creator  
it was saying

who will I send  
to be a witness—  
here am I            send me

I heard myself saying  
and he said  
go and say to this people

hear over and over  
and understand nothing  
look again and again

and again you don't see  
the whole body:  
of language, sound

of action, history  
of memory  
imagination

of matter, light  
they can't even feel  
the energy inside them

the material of their being  
and you will make their hearts harder  
like ignorant fists of matter

and their ears  
heavy earrings for their mind  
and their eyes shut

like a censor's eyes  
before a naked soul  
in front of them

their thoughts become glinting swords  
to hide their narrowness  
to reflect away light

they will stay out late  
like stubborn children  
bleary-eyed

heaven forbid they should see  
with their eyes clear  
hear with open ears

and understand by feeling  
with that sacred metal cow  
of their heart

and so be moved  
to turn and become  
wholly human again

how long I said how long  
this shell this wall  
and he was already saying

until cities have fallen  
to the ground        not a house  
with a person or statue standing

countryside a wasteland  
until this king has driven men  
away        the whole country



blown down like a primitive pile of stones  
some forgotten sacred place  
wiped out like royal contracts etched in sand

even the promise of a remnant of survivors  
will slip from mind  
like the hollow ring of a cliché

like leaves from a blighted oak  
ripped in a hard wind  
crumpled as the tree falls

the pages of that high pride  
the record of its worldly dealings  
will be smooth as a stump

the stump  
the holy seed  
remains.

## Chapter 8

*Verses 16–23*

Roll this testimony up  
in a scroll      this revelation  
hidden in the inner library

of hearts still open  
to the word  
mind open to the ear

I am turning in            to wait for him  
to look up from his reading  
in the book

his face is hidden in  
as if his people had become  
a history book

a book ignorantly dropped  
from sight  
by Israel

like a mirror            absently swept away  
a shattering insult  
but the pages the pieces I will keep

before him  
and I will look for him there  
when he turns again to face us . . .

Listen to me because I  
like my children  
are signs of his reality

children of Israel  
as it was and will be  
in touch with his presence            in Zion

knowing where we come from  
where we're going  
where we are

on the map            the signs  
our lines pass through  
in the vehicle of his word

but when you hear  
the consoling voices  
of stylish intelligence and mass appeal

the religions of faithless men and women  
trying to sell you on yourself  
in the disarming pose of

generous free advice  
urging you to consult ghosts  
and articulate machines

the mindless testimonials  
of spiritual ventriloquists  
hearing the ghosts of themselves

and the assorted animal screechings  
of sophisticated machines  
running their metal tongues

by all means consult the machines  
they are superior to us  
like the dead

and listen to the motor  
of your own cheap power  
over others

as it drowns out self-doubt—  
and why shouldn't we trust the gods  
we make of ourselves—

and they will become oracles  
in the dark        in the spiritual trap  
of their own shadows

knocking wood  
tossing coins  
wishing on stars

beyond light  
from the hand that put his word  
in theirs        hand of light

utterly open daylight  
and the warmth  
of faith in its coming

they will pass through it like one  
locked in the reflection of his shadow  
going deeper into depression

he will walk and walk  
and arrive nowhere as in a dream  
going hungry

for something real  
his mind growing bitter  
he turns on his gods and kings

turns in on himself  
cursing himself senseless  
until his sky and his earth

are one  
until he is floating  
in the naked terror of space inside him

until he is a planet spun free  
into total darkness  
his mind in the grip of bottomless pain

his body desolate and airless  
totally vulnerable  
to the forces of darkness.

## Chapter 9

*Verses 1–7*

The people walking on  
through darkness  
will be overcome by light

those who were locked in the shadow  
of death  
are released by light

you have increased the nation  
not in numbers  
but in the joy of rebirth

they are rejoicing in beautiful weather  
in the fullness of light  
in a full harvest

in the simple joy of a windfall  
they are carrying home the inner prize  
of a deep victory          a selfless pride

like a liberation army coming home  
an underground resistance coming out  
their own home the spoil

openly yours  
because you lifted the impenetrable lid  
the selfish pride the manhole cover

the armor of all oppression  
you have broken the iron grip  
of repressed guilt

and we have broken through  
in touch again  
with the day at Midian

the original victory made new  
the scrap of centuries peeled back  
in the light of your presence

penetrating the manhole  
of material pride        unearthing  
the deep wonder of memory

preserved in the fullness  
of time and space  
earth we walk on and carry within

every military boot  
putting its mindless scrawl  
on earth's drawingboard

every uniform soaked in blood  
or steeped like thoughts  
in the smell of blood

will be tossed in the bonfire  
and in miraculous transformation  
become a fuel for peace        hearts lightened

to see a child being born  
to see the future  
being given to us in the moment

of wonder            to be in touch  
with the inner strength of seeing  
our own past lifted            to be uplifted

in the clean air of justice  
to see the transforming            the shaping  
that is constant reality

to feel the weight of constancy the longing  
that is light as a baby  
in our arms

growing in our love  
the suspended sentence of guilt  
our children will wear like summer clothes

and we will see it with real eyes  
of earth            not in the stars  
we are children of reality

struggling to give justice a name  
as if it were a child  
born to us

like a king  
bringing the world to him  
like blood flowing through the heart

as if the heart of the world's body  
were on a line  
descended from David

in the miracle of time  
unfolding space  
to realize ourselves in

in the insistence of struggle  
to stay in touch      holding  
a lifeline into the deep past

to touch  
the infinite  
within      and live

children of a free nation  
struggling in the name  
of Israel

to reclaim our birth  
to open the window  
of our ancient home

and say we're here to stay  
defending justice to the stars  
integrity to the light of dawn.

## Chapter 14

*Verses 4–21*

One day you'll pick up this satire  
of Babylon and its king  
and sing:



How the storm of power  
has passed  
stormed off the cliff

into an endless pit  
how quiet after all  
the dramatic thunder

the Lord has snapped the golden crutches  
of pride          cracked the whips  
of despots in their own faces

who lashed the people  
from an imperial seat  
no country beyond reach

and now they break out singing  
the whole earth is lying on its back  
peacefully humming to itself

the fir trees are laughing  
in the wind at you  
and the cedars of Lebanon are whispering

since you lay down  
the men have stopped coming  
to chop us down beside you

(Oh graceful long-limbed trees  
silent before the slaughter  
by greedy men

who stumbled over the hills drunk  
like a sunshower  
that now is suddenly gone!)

the waiting room below  
is all astir  
at news of your coming, Babylon

all the shadows are gathering  
of all the dead kings  
of the world

they all stagger up to their high thrones  
like ghosts of mountain goats  
all the stubborn world leaders

they are all muttering they are saying  
not you too  
welcome to the club

so you've decided to join us  
to amount to absolute zero  
to bend your knee to nothing

the big parade of your pride  
pushed by insatiable will  
has come to the edge of the grave

to do a nose dive  
all the royal trumpets  
and inner noise of power

has come to play for maggots  
as you stretch out on your bed of worms  
and pull the blanket of worms over you

how did you fall out of bed  
in heaven bright morning star  
Ishtar          Lucifer

the immortal king  
now reigns over sleepers  
sprawled over the nations at his feet

like the shadow of The Thinker  
on a plaza of flagstones  
you who thought to yourself

I will climb into heaven  
and set my throne on the floor  
of its stars

I'll be king of the mountain  
where the gods meet  
utter North

I'll burst through the clouds  
to make myself  
god of thunder

I'll be Most High  
light  
will kiss my feet

but you've burst like the heaviest headstone  
through the bottomless pit  
utter hole

those who've been there long enough  
to be accustomed to the darkness  
still squint and stare at you

skeptically  
like at a dim and badly painted  
likeness

is this the king who made nations shake  
at his feet like trembling diplomats  
they say scratching the top of their skulls

who blitzed through cities  
in a storm of terror  
smoothing the world before him into desert

who swallowed the keys to prisons  
whose bowels (they said privately) were so hard  
keys came through broken in pieces

who sneered at humor  
who taught the world to laugh  
at humility and tears

to cry in desperate secrecy  
to doubt the liberty  
of their hearts in crying

who spit in the eye of kings  
no foreign subject allowed to return  
his last address: unknown

now all the world's kings reside  
in their own plush tombs  
and sleep at prominent addresses

but you've been kicked out of the mausoleum  
you've been clubbed  
like a Nazi collaborator

raised high above the crowd  
by your heels  
dressed up in royal scarlet

you and your henchmen's blood  
and flung into a hole  
like a horribly disfigured fetus

your head has been cracked  
against the marble of your headstone  
and that stone has been ground to fine powder

scattered in the wind  
like the inhuman seed of your pride  
unfit to be buried

in your land (incestuously exploited)  
with your people (purged)  
with the dignity of even a name

I will not dignify it with sound  
and even your family  
will be stone before it can mouth it

they will pay the sins of their father  
in simple seed: their lives  
extorted from the whole family

of man in the spirit of incest  
in the rape of spirit itself—  
let their seed be spilled

in the hole of their father  
let weeds possess the earth  
before that breed returns.

## Chapter 23

*Verses 16–18*

TYRE, PHOENICIA

Pick up your lyre  
and walk through the city  
where no one remembers

*pick the strings gently  
sing all your songs over  
until you're remembered: desired*

Once again Tyre  
will be handsomely paid  
like a whore

open for hire  
to every self-serving kingdom  
on the leering face of earth

like a royal taxi  
much of the world's commerce  
done inside her

its traffic  
passing through her  
heavily breathing

but her trade her obscene profits  
will become a true vehicle  
this time re-opened

to the core  
filled with light  
nothing held back

nothing under the table  
no self-reproducing capital  
no closet deals

no treasures secretly hidden  
but totally opened for love  
for pure service        a wealth untouched

all the desperate merchandising  
of life and blood and the air of a song  
all the face-saving prostitution

will be a way for the Lord  
the profits and losses a highway  
prosperity will build a house

for those who live in his presence  
who breathe in his air  
there will be food for all

all human desire  
will be clothed  
with dignity

all will be moved  
to fill their place at his table  
to sing his grace.

## Chapter 30

*Verses 8–23*

Come out of yourself  
and take this down  
print it in a book

so it can't be erased like dust  
from the blackboard of people's minds  
so it's engraved in their genes

because this is a stubborn race  
erasing the truth in front of them  
before they even read it

spoiled children: little liars  
refusing to sit still  
for the testimony that really frees them

saying to their open-eyed teachers: go to sleep  
to their poets and prophets:  
no piercing visions please

of uncensored truth  
seduce us with surfaces  
touch up the pain in our lives

with a little rose color  
show us the movie of the future  
so we can sit back and enjoy it



turn off the camera of reality  
and make us like ourselves  
under the glossy coats of postcards

turn off the words of the Lord  
get out of the way  
drown out those primitive feelings

with the upbeat popular tunes  
of car radios  
as we drive on landscaped expressways

over the naked parts  
and around the unpainted sections  
of hard times

even concentration camps  
can be pruned  
for respectable tourists

we can make anything  
look easy  
with modern minds and machines

but the Lord of Israel  
has something to say  
over all

you have swept the truth  
under your consciousness  
and let yourself hate

shamelessly  
these words  
I am speaking

you despise them  
with the clenched teeth  
you hide behind smooth lips

used to deceive  
and to set an example of trust  
in cynical salesmanship

and moral bankruptcy  
relying on the cheap paper  
of politics

the secret darkness  
you wall in yourselves  
is a fatal flaw

a fault line  
nobody sees and easily forgets  
under intense pressure

a trace of steam  
a slight rumbling  
is vaguely there until the

instant shock  
the earth cracking as simply  
as a china nicknack

knocked from the shelf  
in the deeper quake  
of his justice

your inflated careers  
mere figurines  
of rigid selfhood

will fall like tiny porcelains  
from a tower  
bursting totally apart

not a piece recognizable  
mere traces of fine powder  
as total as the sudden shocking

explosion of a zeppelin  
not even a bolt or propeller  
left for salvage

not even a photograph  
a scrap of paper—  
so irretrievably present

so decisive  
is his presence  
in his speaking

these are his words  
precise pieces of language  
making up the one

over Israel  
over all  
in my speaking

a secureness is found  
as one slows down  
a quiet confidence

in hearing and seeing  
building strength  
to open onself

in the strength of trust  
but not this people  
only their mouths are open

saying not us  
we've got fast horses  
we can escape any danger

and they will escape  
and they will ride  
into the jaws of danger

saying we are so clever  
as the teeth flash  
behind them            unclenched

in a terrible smile  
one of those smiles  
will set a thousand fleeing

ten bared lips  
and all will be running  
as if they could escape themselves

as if they could escape  
up the self-made mountain  
of themselves

until what is left of them  
stands free in the breeze  
like a flag left on a mountain

like a warning light still flashing  
in the wind-racked unearthly solitude  
of a deserted runway

from some forgotten war  
a tin flag in a strange wind  
left behind on the moon

but even now            as then  
the Lord is waiting  
to embrace you

you will open to him  
as pure mountain air  
totally surrounding you in an embrace

there is a just voice speaking  
in the quiet strength of those  
listening

to his presence unfolding  
around them  
like a scroll of overwhelming poetry

you are survivors of the future  
in Jerusalem in Israel  
your tears have fallen like rain

in the desert of the past  
where he hears you crying  
he responds in the flowing

of your own voice  
and though your mouth is dry  
from the suffering you've recorded

and your hand weak from the journey  
from the inner severing  
of the hands you've had to let go

the teacher you've carried deep within  
in the seat of your conscience  
will come out

passing memory and thought  
and the huge mirror of imagination  
to stand in front of you

in the light of your eyes  
your teacher your life  
in front of you

you will see yourself  
alive in the future  
you will come out to meet it

and the words will come over you  
a voice will be there  
that was within you

and your ears will embrace it  
and your arms will reach out  
and sweep away the precious idols

your poets will be prophets  
vehicles on the one road  
in front of you

a real road  
and when your mind wanders  
they will call you back

to the present  
to the space and time  
we create together: *dialogue*

of creation  
wind and rain  
on the open faces

pleasing the deep roots  
cleansing the leaves  
that bear his message

you will bite into the sweet  
miraculous rainbow  
of real fruit

and spit out the bitter fruit of self-made power  
the dry self-worship  
greased with gold and silver

worked up like sexual fantasies  
into illusions of success  
over the dead bodies of others

those dreams will be wiped out  
real for only an instant  
returned to the earth as manure is

enriching it for the rain  
he sends  
to wash away the decaying past

to open the infinite eyes  
of the living past:  
the seeds we plant

as each living thing does  
and so there is always bread  
and meat

and if we let our eyes fully open  
to ripen in the air  
we are planted in

we can grow up and see  
beyond it  
into the infinite universe of stars.

## Chapter 40

*Verses 1-11*

Console my people  
comfort your people  
my Lord speaking

in my voice saying  
speak to the heart  
of Jerusalem tenderly

in a voice embracing her  
call to her  
that her exile is over

come home  
the sentence is over  
that knocked the voice out of her

her guilt has been paid  
into the firm hand  
that is the Lord's



into which she paid more than herself  
and now that hand of justice  
is still open

to support her  
listen a voice is calling  
to open a road through the desert

clear a highway for the Lord  
straight through the desert  
and through your throat that is parched

deep stone valleys  
you struggle through  
will be filled in

lifted to your feet  
to make a smooth way  
a plain rolled out before you

stubborn obstacles  
mountains and hills  
will be swept away like dust

and a new carpet laid out  
level  
for all flesh to see

and to walk on together  
to feel the firm reality  
of his way

spread before us  
direct and clear  
as words spoken through air

touch all that is there  
and we will see the Lord clearly  
as these words from him

a voice said speak  
and a voice said  
what should I say

say  
all flesh is grass  
and the reality of love is there

wild flowers in the field  
and all flesh blooms  
no longer than a flower

the grass shrivels and dies  
the flowers curl up to paper  
in the wind

that is an undying breath  
of the Lord  
surely the people are grass

grass shrivels flowers fade  
but the word of our God  
stands in the wind forever

stand up prophets and speak to Jerusalem  
your tired litany reawakens as poetry  
embrace her with good news

speak to her  
heart of Zion  
from the top of a mountain

let your voice rise to the mountains  
with the strength of love  
fearless headline of truth

let all the cities of Israel see  
and hear the true  
Here I am!

Here is your God  
here  
see how he is strength itself

and vision is his arm  
ruling hearts  
with the power of feeling justice

to see we are here  
we are our own reward  
his words make us a priceless vehicle

carrying his work forward  
in our arms like books  
that is the air we breathe

and we are carried in it  
like lambs  
gently breathing

in the arms of a shepherd  
in the law of life itself  
in the justice of air itself

we look around and  
there are pastures  
and leaning against his arm new mothers

giving suck  
and he is leading the ewes  
to water.

## Chapter 52

*Verses 13–15*

Listen to this vision  
and know my poorest servant  
my student most despised

overcomes          uplifted and held  
above material honor  
a tower an immovable mountain

a model of strength that makes  
faces of worldly power pale          masks  
over wills of mere steel

the many who turned aside in their superior air  
appalled at his uncivilized  
state his wild appearance

as if he had no human parents  
as if he came from beyond humanity  
out of some ancient ruins

a wild-eyed student  
starved and sickly  
from a condemned ghetto

those many appalled nations  
“civilized” and “progressive”  
will find their eyes glued

and their imaginations riveted  
on him  
the mouths of world leaders

will fall open  
in amazed silence  
before their own ignorance

of something so real  
their lips turning to rubber  
before their false education

their ears burning  
with the fact  
of what they’ve never listened to.

## Chapter 53

I  
Is there anyone to believe  
what we’ve listened to  
as we report it

who is there  
who’s actually seen the Lord’s  
arm around the shoulders

of the despised        this richness  
incredible support  
freely given to him

who would have believed  
seeing we were as unconscious of him  
among us as a common tree

a weed tree in a lot  
junk-strewn in a poor section  
of the city

what could have been there  
to attract us        no handsomeness  
nothing to divert the eye

how could we even turn our heads  
for something so poor in our eyes  
so uninspiring

he was a thing rejected  
despised for being human  
in an offensive suit of clothes

the clothes of suffering  
a shirt of pain  
a cloak of sorrow

a coat the solid color  
of loss        worldly indifference  
like leprosy written across his face

so densely it hurt to look  
as if we'd only see  
ourselves reflected in it

as in a dense layer of dust  
over a window  
in an ancient place we've long forgotten

we don't want to remember  
we loathe that place  
we despise weakness

and he meant nothing to us  
a blight on our existence  
we couldn't even condone his existence

but it was our  
loss and our  
pain he bore

our hidden fear and indifference  
he wore  
openly for us

while we wrote him off as beneath us  
as an example of God's vengeance  
as being even our own self-vindication

he was punished  
tortured by disease  
to condone our fear

hidden under a worldly cloak  
thrown over our unconscious  
we've swept it out of sight

we wrote it off  
with the hurt and loss  
as if struggle and pain

were not a human bond  
a mirror in which to see  
ourselves

not an unreflecting  
stone  
fear symbol

but he was shattered  
for our heart of stone  
he was locked in ghettos

for our hidden guilt  
and we are made human  
together

in the punishment and contempt  
he wears in the world  
on this earth for us

in black and blue  
our eyes can see it  
and we are healed by that seeing

he makes us real  
we were all victims  
we were all sheep

we strayed            we were lost  
we wandered away  
lost in ourselves

we were all nations  
servants of our own  
interests



we made our own selfish way  
slavishly alone  
each with our own patch of lust

in the unconscious pasture  
of self-indulgence  
trespassers of spirit

silent accomplices of thugs  
on the highway of feeling  
that is the Lord's

that is his word  
and the Lord has chosen  
his servant to carry it

a burden of pain on his naked back  
beyond power of men to lay on him  
it is the guilt of us all

made real  
the guilt inside us  
the abyss we were losing

our richness of feeling in  
and now we see how cheaply  
we've papered over loss

how openly it's borne  
beyond our power to pay  
he was a low animal in our eyes

a carrier of disease  
and we treated him  
lower than dogs

but he didn't open his mouth  
for bitterness  
he was open to the core

he was a lamb  
led to slaughter  
he was an innocent sheep

as his coat is shorn from him  
but he was human        he suffered  
and like a lamb his mouth didn't open

out of bitterness  
and he was led away  
stripped of his rights

shorn of his humanity  
not a shred of justice for him  
not a mouth opened for him

he was deported  
he was sentenced  
out of existence itself

like a nation marked for death  
he was led into the fire  
of bitter hatred

he was led alive  
into ovens        he burned  
as indifferently to the world as an ordinary lamp

turned on at evening  
a lamp of skin  
and no one gave it thought

he was a flame  
lit in the darkness of terror  
he was a light

to the truly guilty  
those who deserved to be lost  
in their own land

in their own bitter darkness  
in the abyss  
of their hidden guilt

my own people were blind  
but his eyes were true  
suffering the world for them

and the world gave him a grave  
unmarked like a criminal's  
like a mass grave

the way cattle are buried  
the way refuse is disposed of  
the way a rich man

orders cut flowers  
like common flowers crushed beside a highway  
he was nothing he was in the way

he was banned from sight          victimized  
by a decadent justice  
a worldly masquerade

of men dressed up in power  
he was naked          innocent of crime  
not guilty of even a common lie

but the Lord allowed him to feel  
pain to be open  
to injustice as to disease

to be vulnerable as an animal  
given in spirit of sacrifice  
a faith in a human future

and out of that death march  
through the fire  
out of that holocaust

out of the deepest abyss  
beyond torture and despair  
out of sheer hell furnaces

he comes through  
piercing through the guilt  
deep fear and self-contempt

of all the world  
because he gave himself whole  
persistently human

transcending spears of bitterness  
and for his pain  
the pain of all creation

he will have children again  
and he will see them  
as sure as they will feel

his soul  
and the deep consolation spoken  
in the openness allowed

by the Lord  
by his hand  
through his words

through the pure insistence  
to bear his words  
in human hands          his servant

out of the massive depths of pain  
into the daylight  
of a living nation

that is his future illuminated  
as real and warm as a body  
lit by the color of feeling

my servant an example  
lighting the steps up  
from deep depression beneath the surface

everywhere  
a struggle for the merest foothold  
in the mass of people and nations

and out of the inhuman scars the clawing  
he made his heart a vessel  
out of the storm the raging

of primitive pride  
he carried my justice a lightness  
in his nameless heart          open

a room without walls  
room for the lowest and highest  
guilt          all that is borne within

and without: the world is his  
to share with the richest nations  
in the present

I make his future present  
and the mouths of worldly power  
fall open in awe

at the beauty  
the utter reality laid bare  
of life itself

because he opened his heart  
totally putting it in the hands  
of death

speaking straight through a transparent life  
from his soul  
and his nakedness was a menace

he was judged for his skin  
what is visible to the lowest  
a disgrace to worms

dressed in material  
of pride  
a crime to those human eyes

locked up in themselves  
and he was given the final clothes  
of death dust of the earth

and he wore the deaths  
of those with murder in their hearts  
and the criminal thoughts

of all in self-hating prisons  
and he was stripped of his self  
for sheer integrity

of the deeper language  
of creation  
and as he was scarred

in his openness  
beyond worldly recognition  
for the self-debased to see

their disease in him  
and as he was crushed by weight  
of their hidden guilt revealed

he heard it is the creator speaking  
words of life  
you will survive by them

your voice: lightness of breath itself  
clothe the cold and hidden  
hearts of stone

and warm in the dark  
the unborn       vulnerable as you were  
your light into the future.

## Chapter 58

### *Verses 1–12*

Open up and speak from the heart  
a voice rushing through you  
startling the air

a lover  
rushing to the side  
of a wounded mate

wind opening the door  
of a deserted mountain cabin  
a wounded mountain ram

lift your voice  
like a horn  
to your lips

calling to my people  
they are guilty  
they are wounded

hiding their wounds  
inflicted on each other  
within in pride

indifference and self-righteousness  
shout it openly jar the doors and windows  
of this House of Israel



because they're still looking for me  
daily finding pride  
in looking like they're searching

all dressed up  
in clothes of righteousness  
like a moral nation

wearing the moral law on their sleeve  
and acting  
as if their integrity depends on it

as if they're beyond acting  
so may approach me  
like a judge over their house

asking for direction  
in the immoral streets  
anxious for approval of their way

anxious children  
impatient to please  
tugging at the sleeve of justice

why are we fasting a day  
if you won't take a moment  
to notice they ask

why are we humbling ourselves  
dressed in mourning  
sacrificing body

baring soul  
if you won't know it  
answer us

here it is  
you ask for answered prayers  
when you won't stop to think

thinking with your feet  
carrying you to the marketplace  
only of yourself

how to further your business  
on the shoulders  
of others

thinking with your stomach  
the day you're fasting  
an empty stomach-mind

unable to get past yourself  
pushing and shoving  
unable to stand still inside

turning the intensity of this day  
up like metallic car radios  
playing mindless words and music

geared to desperation  
to turning a profit on silence  
an assembly line of minutes

on which you turn out  
cheap images of yourself  
material to digest with an iron stomach

making you more irritable  
grasping for words of spirit  
to swallow like bitter pills

to make yourself feel better  
about turning your soul  
inside out like another pocketbook

turning openness around  
with a gun at its back  
like a desperate criminal

“sacrificing” your precious time  
at the primitive altar  
with the money of your ritual donations

turning on a figment of imagination  
in a pagan death-cult act of “self-sacrifice”  
in which you offer a hollow shell

going through mechanical motions  
impressing hollow religious phrases  
on metal

you fast with a vengeance  
pushing past the inner voice  
too bruised to rise and be heard

is this a day for rising  
standing in my presence  
expecting a reward

for physical sacrifice        for your fasting  
bowing heads like royal footmen  
like rows of bullrushes

parting for the heavy prow of ritual  
self-serving ghost ship  
with its real cargo of slaves

instead of your soul you save  
face by fasting  
and I can't see through *that*?

wake up to a day  
beyond acting  
for yourself

the Lord's voice speaks  
for itself:  
act for others

not with faces but hands  
opening  
locks of injustice

sophisticated knots  
tied mentally and physically  
around the poor and powerless

like a harness  
to break their spirit  
free them          break the locks

cut the reins of oppression  
rise to the occasion  
fast to free man's spirit

make a day for opening  
your cupboards  
sharing with the poor

open your house your heart  
to the homeless  
open your eyes

instead of filling your stomach  
instead of harnessing the weak for it  
look at the hopeless around you

put your hand through that invisible curtain  
and throw a coat around their shoulders  
those are men and women

flesh like you        desperate and blind  
outside the walls you've built to hide in—  
the *otherness* you reach for is *there*

all around you  
nakedly human  
to a soul undressed by kindness

bare hands  
untying the cloak of self-serving pride  
and wrapping it around a naked body

and then all around you  
as sudden as light  
to eyes opening in the morning

the light inside you breaks open  
as certain and irrevocable  
as dawn

you will see yourself  
healed by a human warmth  
in the reality of daylight

a sky clearing over you  
like new flesh over a wound  
your body will be whole

and you will see it in the light  
of others            revealed  
in care for the hurt you've left behind

and openness to those you find  
on the way of your future  
like lost memories of your creator

memory repressed  
oppressed            dispossessed  
now yours from which to speak

sing out openly  
and the Lord returns  
your voice

call into empty space  
for help  
and he answers "Here I am"

and if you open  
the locks of injustice around you  
rip open the curtain of suspicion

remove the ring from the finger of status  
you point at the poor  
and open your mind to them

removing the insults from your tongue  
and if you open your hand  
dropping your body's show of pride

showing compassion sharing your gift of life  
pouring the milk of your kindness  
for the starved and hopeless

then the light inside you  
will rise like the sun  
from the dead of night

and the depression hidden within you  
will walk out openly a child  
free under an afternoon sky

the Lord will be behind you  
always around you  
water in the desert of your need

meat and strength for your bones  
and over you gentle rains  
your life a fruitful garden

a mountain spring  
always running  
under a clear sky

and many from among you will walk out  
to build on your ruins  
firming the shaken doors and windows

reaffirming the ancient foundations  
of your ancestors  
on earth

and you will walk out  
in the universe  
deep in the firmament

building from the ruins  
of planetary bodies  
renewing the foundation

of the changing universe  
continually  
by your presence

water of your body  
unchanging air  
of your soul

you will be spoken of  
openly and everywhere  
as discoverer of lost ways

restorer of faded memories  
nurse to broken dreams  
surveyor of a universal highway

landscaper of sandswept paths irrigator of deserts  
plasterer of broken walls rebuilder of broken defenses  
archaeologist of morning

making a world  
to live in        secure  
in the infinite light of reality.



## Chapter 66

### Verses 1-2

The Lord speaks  
this way  
the sky

and all ways behind it  
is a royal seat for me  
space

is where I rest  
and the earth my footrest  
in time

where could you build a house  
for me  
where a place

especially for me to rest  
as if I would sleep or abide  
there        or there

when I made all this  
all of it comes from my hand  
all that is came into being

from me  
my Lord  
is speaking

but I look at man especially  
for the man or woman oppressed  
poor and powerless

when he knows he is  
broken in spirit and  
filled with humility

his body trembling with care  
open to the others  
to my words.